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LOVED.

A Novel.

BY

G. L.

"———— with all things to prove us."

London:
REMINGTON AND CO.,
HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.

1884.
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To Violet Fane
I beg
to be allowed,
the honour of dedicating
this little novel,
as an unworthy tribute
of inexpressible
admiration.

I.

THE OLD HOUSE IN RUSSELL SQUARE.

In one of the old-fashioned houses in Russell Square lived old Mr. Tait. He had begun life as a clerk in a well-known firm of solicitors, and with hard work and honest perseverance had gained the respect and confidence of the head of the firm.

By one of those wonderful strokes of Dame Fortune's fairy wand, who never appears to tire in showering gifts on her favourites, the partners died off one by one, and finally Mr. Tait's patron stood alone, and he, a childless old bachelor, in his turn entered on his endless sleep, leaving the business, a very important one, besides all his accumulated wealth, which amounted to a lordly fortune, to George Tait, whom he had learnt to love as if he had been his own son, expressing a

wish that his successor should continue the business, as he considered that happiness in this life is only to be acquired by continual occupation.

George Tait would have felt lost without it! Living so long with the old man, he had himself become prematurely old, although he was but forty-six when his kind protector died. He had never mixed in any society, that one within his reach he instinctively eschewed, and higher grades were beyond his grounds.

About this time a favourite sister of his died; she had thrown herself away, so all her friends thought, on a worthless young scamp, the Honble. Captain Stacey, the discarded scion of a noble house, who, after spending the little money she had, and having also, at divers times, drawn pretty considerable sums out of his brother-in-law, wound up a worthless life and reckless career by drinking himself to death in the shortest possible time, and died, leaving his young wife with one little girl, Laura, who, notwithstanding her charming, loving ways, was incapable of filling that void which the handsome young scapegrace's death had left in his wife's heart, for, with all his many shortcomings, he had never been known to speak a rough or unkind word to her. She

gradually pined and faded, and passed away one bright morning, when the sun was shining through the old green blinds in Russell Square (for her brother had made her share his home), and the birds singing a jubilee, and the roar of the young London season beginning to make itself heard in the far distance, rising, phœnix-like, from its ashes after a dull and dreary winter.

Poor George Tait, who had never loved any woman as he loved that sister, sat by her bedside, her hand in his, and thinking of what use to him was all his untold wealth, since it could not stay Death's ruthless hand, or buy back the dear life that was ebbing away, and about to leave him, more solitary than ever, in the big old house!

"George, darling, you will care for Laura when I am gone? She will soon become dearer to you than I could ever have been, with my bad health and my continual yearning to join my love; and now the time has come I am quite happy, only sorry at leaving you, dear!"

Poor George sobbed out his promise that Laura should be dear to him as his own child, and bowed his head in divine submission over the thin hand,

which soon turned cold and stiff between his fingers.

And so Laura Stacey became the adopted daughter of her rich uncle, and everything which money could buy was lavished on the young heiress.

From early youth she had given the promise of great beauty, and kept that promise, too, as years rolled on, and the tall, lanky girl bloomed into her teens. She had no girl companions of her own age, for George Tait could not bring his mind to part from her by sending her to school, so governesses were got instead; but, when she arrived at the age of seventeen, he thought it better that for one year she should go to Paris, and receive there the finishing touch to her education.

She had no relations whom she was acquainted with, besides her uncle, except an aunt, Mrs. Norton, a sister of Mr. Tait's, but never *dear* to him as that other one had been. This woman, who possessed in her youth beauty of a certain low type, had fascinated a rich city tradesman, who, after making her his wife, died, leaving her with one son and the comfortable income of £3,000 a year.

Laura saw a good deal of these people, more than she cared to sometimes, for the boy, her senior by a few years, was rough and coarse, swaggered no end about his riding horses and his last new tie, and sang horribly low music-hall songs, which jarred on Laura's ear; and his mother was still more objectionable. She was jealous of the favour shown by her brother to this little Laura, and envious, too, of the girl's patrician air and refined beauty; she hated her with all the spite which a small nature alone can feel towards one it knows to be its superior, for the aunt, with her high colour and bold black eyes, felt she was queen of the occasion when she patronised by an afternoon call some of her late husband's relations, who thought, and too often flattered her vanity by saying aloud —

"Well, Mrs. Norton, you *are* a fine woman!"

But when, sometimes, she took Laura for a drive, or to an afternoon concert, she would actually approach an almost pale tint with rage, on seeing all eyes of the fashionable world, both men and women, turn and rest in undisguised admiration on the tall girl at her side, who had not a particle of colour in her cheeks, and whose small, straight nose she considered not to be com-

pared with her own. (There she was right, for her own was strongly suggestive of having been born, bloomed, and developed in the atmosphere of the Seven Dials.)

Notwithstanding all this, she would have been proud to call this girl one day her daughter-in-law, and lead her the devil's own life afterwards! So she kept her spiteful thoughts as much as she could to herself, and endeavoured to do the civil to Laura with as good a grace as she could manage to call up.

"Jack, have you been to Russell Square this morning?"

Mrs. Norton herself lived, to her mind, in the more fashionable locality of Queen's Gate.

"Yes, ma; Laura is off to-morrow morning to Paris. Uncle is going to take her over himself. By Jove! that girl is a stunner! I should not be astonished if some enterprising Frenchman carried her off from under the very nose of the old gentleman. I do like to take her for a walk; the fellows stare so, and look as if they would give something to be in my place. I wish she weren't so devilish stuck up, though."

"Well, I don't see myself where her beauty lies. It isn't in her *nose* I'm sure, for she has

hardly got any to speak of. I was always told that *mine* was what artists admire—of the '*retroussay*' style, and no mistake about it; but, of course, you can't expect *ordinary* people to appreciate what is truly artistic."

"Oh yes, ma; your nose would be all right if it was not quite so thick at the end, you know. I suppose what you have screwed out of your waist has made its way, some of it, into your nose; it must go somewhere, you know."

"Jack, you are most impertinent; but there's no gratitude in children. Here am I, a widow of a *very* little over thirty. I could marry again any day, have another family, and cut you out of your extravagances, you young dog, and I should be treated as well by you, for I could not be treated *worse!*"

Here a few tears began to ooze out of the widow's black eyes, foretelling a copious play of waterworks to follow. Jack well knew the signs of a threatening storm, and, being wise in his generation, also thought it might be rather a bad thing for him if he found himself "cut off" by his mother taking unto herself a second husband; so he encircled her round waist, and kissing away the trickling dewdrops, exclaimed —

"Why I was only chaffing, mammy dear. I am awfully proud of you, and there are precious few women can boast of your attractions! For my own part, I admire a jolly good armful, and Laura will never be at your age what *you* are"—with a queer wink thrown, for his own private satisfaction, over his left shoulder at the sleeping pug on the hearthrug—"so come, let's make it up. You have got a mighty too much good sense to throw *yourself*, let alone your *fortune*, on some snivelling ass who would cut your account short at your dressmaker's, as well as stop my few enjoyments. No, we are too awfully jolly as we are, are we not? Now put on your last new bonnet, and let's go and see Laura and wish them 'good-bye.'"

So saying, he drew his mother towards the door, and left her, still wiping away a few rebellious tears, to go upstairs and put on her finery, which always had a certain quieting effect upon her nerves, whilst he ordered round the brougham.

The one soft spot in Widow Norton's nature was her love for her long-legged, awkward son. To her he was the type of everything most to be admired in the opposite sex. His loungy, idle, lethargic ways were the promise of a splendid

manhood, the dawn of genius. To her middle-class mind, rough manners and swaggering ways in women's society were but the just prerogative and assertion of man's rights, the woman, according to her creed, being the inferior animal *because* the weaker one; the man was the bread-winner, and his chattel, called "wife," living on his bounty, should be perpetually reminded of her position.

During her husband's lifetime, she would no more have dared order her own carriage round without first appealing to him than she would have contemplated putting on his hat and overcoat, and, cane in hand, striding down Regent Street! In fact, there had been a joke on the subject, which had gone the round of the mess table at the Barracks, repeated by a young Cornet in the Guards, who had happened to be dining at the Norton's one night when they were speaking at table about the promising young Jack, then a few years old, who had successfully got through an attack of measles. Conversation flagging, and silence becoming painful, Mrs. Norton, no doubt in a moment of mental aberration, conduced, perhaps, by a too copious attack on the champagne, remarked, in her usually loud voice, to her oppo-

site neighbour, Mrs. Perkins (of the firm of Perkins and Co.) —

"Now, I am just going to observe, Mrs. Perkins, with regard to my boy" —

"Well, my dear," interrupted Mr. Norton, glaring at her from his end of the table, "I really *do* think, considering all things, that you might at least have said, '*our* boy;' surely he is *my* boy?"

"All right, Mr. Norton, we will give you the benefit of the doubt!" exclaimed the young Cornet smiling, and tipping a wink to his next door neighbour, a young lady from Clapham, who, I am sorry to say, notwithstanding the well-known established respectability of that particular locality, returned it.

It proved afterwards the opening chapter to a free and easy conversation between the young people in the conservatory after dinner.

The comfortable brougham rolled smoothly along through the Park, where those creatures who are allowed to hang on to the skirts of society, because society thinks they are not worth the trouble of a kick to send them flying (they get it though when they become too obtrusive!), were taking their afternoon "hairing," as their footmen would

observe. This airing consists in going up and down, like a horse in a mill, from Hyde Park Corner to Albert Gate. When the coachman gets so far, and the horses, freed from the wedging in of a continuous stream of hired broughams, city brokers' smart turns-out, &c., are just beginning to stretch their limbs into a good slinging trot, and expand their nostrils to breathe a little fresher air, invariably the occupant of the carriage shouts out—"John, turn back!" and the funereal procession is resumed, and these would-be "fashionables" continue to gaze, with outstretched necks, on a string of faces as uninteresting as their own, all wearing a strained expression of looking-out for something, and a vacant look of dulness and dissatisfaction at not having found it, pitiable to behold! But apparently they appear to have gained the summit of their ambition and the goal of all their endeavours, if they succeed, in being well smothered by mud or dust (as the case may be) from carriage wheels of the aristocracy as they impatiently dash through the monotonous pageant on their way to their various destinations.

Well, I confess it is a treat well worth the martyrdom of an afternoon's drive in the Park to catch a flying glimpse of the beautiful Lady D— by

her husband's side, leaning back on the luxurious cushions of her victoria duchesse; the vision of a sweet pale face, lighted up by two soft brown eyes, beaming under rippling waves of dark chestnut hair, which the rays from the setting sun kiss into threads of burnished gold; a woman whose peerless beauty is equalled by her spotless life, untainted by the vile breath of scandal, which has never been able to find a breath wherewith to live in the atmosphere of her queenly presence. She flashes by, muffled in soft velvet and furs up to her dainty chin, on her way to reach the pure air of a drive in Richmond Park.

Mrs. Norton dispenses her smiles and bobs as she recognizes passing acquaintances.

"Oh, Jack, there is Mrs. Hall, of Lancaster Gate."

It is a curious particularity of a certain class of persons that they designate people by the streets they live in, which, probably, by the commercial mind is intended to convey the different degrees of consideration to be dealt out to them, according to the rents paid for their houses. Now Lancaster Gate supposes an income of at least two or three thousand a year; there is a vision attached to the very name of it, which suggests

the dream of the possibility of dinner parties, routs, balls, &c., where the assemblies are, it is true, somewhat more crowded than select, but still there may be a few titles flying about, and to mercantile minds "quantity" makes up for "quality," at which they not unfrequently have been known to turn up their virtuous noses, fox-like, at the grapes.

"The aristocracy, my dear, is so depraved," observed Mrs. Norton. "Lady Fulton flaunting her lover under her husband's very nose! *She* is no better than she should be! What is the world coming to? But, lor! I see her bowing to me actually. Oh dear, Jack, is my bonnet quite straight? And are the strings all right? And is there no patch of powder on the tip of my nose? I came out in such a hurry!"

"Oh, you're all right, mother."

And so Lady Fulton's victoria was pulled up alongside of Mrs. Norton's brougham, and an interesting conversation ensued, which ended in Lady Fulton's being invited to Mrs. Norton's approaching ball, and her lover, Colonel Bolton, too, to the exclusion of the husband, who was said to be going away for some fishing.

Mrs. Norton's virtuous mind swallowed the pill

offered to her, for she knew well enough Lady Fulton's presence in Queen's Gate was only to be bought at her *own* price—and a title *sounds* so well!

Then on they drove down crowded Oxford Street, leaving the roll of the tidal wave of fashion to beat itself out on "*this* side of Oxford Street;" it would die a horrible and unnatural death if it allowed itself to cross to "the other side," so better be extinguished in all its glory just beyond the sacred bounds of May Fair.

Jack thought it a pleasant relief when they entered the comparative "quiet" of Russell Square, and drew up in front of the old house.

They were ushered into a back room, which Laura called her own, where a delicious scent of double-violets and the dear old-fashioned wall-flower greeted their noses. A golden-headed spaniel of royal descent just raised herself from her velvet cushion, and going up to Jack wagged her feathery tail in welcome, not deigning to notice his mother in any way (she never did), and then returned to her couch, where, after a sigh of satisfaction at things in general, and her own affairs in particular, she rolled herself up into a

voluptuous ball of floss silk, and gave herself up to the god of sleep, who equally presides over the canine as well as the mortal world.

There was an air of refinement about the room entirely wanting in the mansion at Queen's Gate; a sort of atmosphere which breathed of the presence of the presiding goddess, who now entered the room with the dignity and self-possession of a woman of the world, added to the witching graces of "sweet seventeen."

Laura stooped her peachy cheek to meet her aunt's fat face, who thereon deposited a noisy kiss. Laura had long ago broken in Jack not to expect a "cousinly embrace," as he called it, for she had an innate dislike to meaningless slobbers, and a quiet shake of the hand she considered more honest and true of purpose, and certainly more agreeable, than a noisy, slobbery salute from a rough boy. Jack was all very well, but he required keeping in order.

"Well, Laura, it is such a lovely day I wonder we have found you in. *Such a Park!* I saw Mrs. Hall, of Lancaster Gate, Mrs. Wiseman, of Shoddy Gardens, and Lady Fulton, who all but invited *herself* to my ball. I really didn't want her! She has made herself too much talked about with that

Colonel Bolton, of the Guards; and really I cannot *afford* to know those sort of people."

"Well, aunt, as far as I am concerned, if I had not pride and confidence enough in my own self just to *know* whoever I please (and let those who object keep away) I think I really should have just enough pride not to publicly acknowledge my want of position, and allow *others* to imagine they had a right to dictate to me who I am to know, and whom I am *not* to know. I should like to see them try it! I'd pretty soon give them a 'Roland for their Oliver!' But I am sorry for you, aunt, that you are so poverty stricken, as far as your position, in what you call 'society' goes."

"I say, Laura, you are rather down on the missus, eh?"

"Well, Jack, I can't help it; I do so dislike those smallnesses, they are so contemptible, so utterly distasteful to me."

"Oh! all very fine, miss, for you to talk in that way. I suppose, because my brother has made an utter fool of himself, and spoilt you, you think you can give yourself grand airs indeed! but you'll find out your mistake by-and-bye when you go into society."

"Certainly, aunt, if ever I do go into what

you call 'society,' it shall be into that grade of it where such notions would be considered too contemptible for them even to be allowed an utterance; and where people, although they may not be rolling in wealth, or able to afford to live in Lancaster Gate, like those acquaintances of yours you mentioned just now, still are well enough off to *afford* to know whom they please."

"Hoity Toity! You will have to bring down that spirit of yours a bit ere you get on in the world, my fine lady."

"Then I shall never try it, aunt; it would not agree with my constitution."

"Now when you two have finished bickering, let's talk 'bis,'" said Jack, who had but a very feeble notion about the subject in discussion, but thought it becoming an awful bore.

"Well, Jack, what you call 'bis' means, I suppose, facts; unpleasant ones to me, for I am about to leave dear old London, and not look on its dear old face again for many months to come. How I shall miss dear uncle! and you too, Jack, though you plague my life well-nigh out of me sometimes. I really don't see what I am going to Paris for; I am well up in French.

Yet, I suppose, it is a wise thing to take a few lessons in that exquisite school for learning how to wear one's clothes, as only a Frenchwoman knows how to wear them. The word 'chic,' which has become an English expression, is essentially a French accomplishment, born and bred in France, and is little understood here. I mean to try and understand it, for I do not see why women should not always make themselves look as nice as they possibly can; it is a duty which they owe to their fellow creatures. I shall try and do my duty in that way, and you shall have the exquisite satisfaction, on my return from Paris, of seeing clothes properly 'put on' and carried, dear aunt, for I know how fond you are of dress, and what intense pleasure it gives you to see a well-dressed woman (next to being well-dressed yourself); in fact, to a nature so unselfish as yours, the pleasure must be greater, for you cannot always stand yourself in front of a cheval glass and admire yourself from top to toe, but you shall look at me."

"Laura," said Jack, in an undertone, "how you do love to teaze the mater! Now, I should have thought that it was the most excruciating agony for one woman to look on another and feel

she is perfect, and herself a fright by comparison."

"Thank you Jack," said his mother, "the case has to be proved first. I don't admire French fal de lalhs myself, and do not think they ever come near to an elegantly dressed Englishwoman—no woman in the world dresses as well as an Englishwoman."

"It is not the world's opinion, nevertheless," observed Laura, "and from time immemorial I have always heard that Frenchwomen have set the fashions to the universe, let alone to England, whose women are quoted, in the matter of dress, as having about the *worst* taste, although they have somewhat improved lately."

"Jack! when you have done listening to that frivolous and contemptible lecture on dress," interposed Mrs. Norton, "perhaps you will see your mother to the carriage? Good-bye, Laura, and a pleasant and *successful* visit to Paris. When my brother comes in, please wish him 'good-bye' for me. I cannot wait, I must be home early as I expect some friends to dinner, and I have to arrange the flowers."

Whereupon Laura again stooped her regal head to meet Mrs. Norton's fat kiss, and then, raising

her pretty lips, deposited on Jack's ruddy cheek a soft kiss, which descended like a snowflake on a sunburnt rock and was absorbed there.

"Good-bye, my darling cousin," said Jack, with a slight tremor in his rough voice at the unusual caress, and also an indescribable and dangerous glow of pleasure about his heart at the contact of those lips. Out flounced Mrs. Norton, with an inward feeling of having been worsted in the small feminine encounter at arms, and that, too, by a pale-faced girl in her teens.

Meanwhile Laura sat down by the fire; it was a bright May afternoon, but she always loved a fire whenever the weather would bear it (and there were cold winds flying about), and taking up her book, buried her somewhat flushed cheeks over its leaves, until she was disturbed by the entrance of her uncle, who greeted her in his usual warm and affectionate manner. All the wealth of his loving and solitary nature was centred upon her, he had no love to give to any other living thing save her spaniel, which came next in his affections.

"Oh, uncle, aunt and Jack have been here to make us their adieux; aunt told me I was to wish you 'good-bye' for her, as she had to be home early, as some people were coming to dine with her.

I don't know how it is, dear, but aunt irritates me so dreadfully, and she drives me to say things I am ashamed of and sorry for afterwards; for I know I ought not to be rude to a woman so much older than I am myself, but unless I have 'my say' I feel as if I should appear to agree with her, and my whole nature rises up against it. Oh! uncle dear, if what she calls 'society' is the contemptible thing she represents it to be, the Lord defend me from it! I should prefer the company of my maid, dear old Riddles! for she, at least, never says anything to rub me up the wrong way, and make a brute of me."

"My love, don't let little things worry you by giving them an importance which they do not deserve. I know what you mean, but Georgiana is a good soul; her faults are more those of her bringing up and associations with a certain class who invariably try to assume, and to be what they are not; if they only left themselves alone they would be far more pleasant to deal with, but those who know better should judge their faults generously, and not 'sit on them' too much, as, I fear, my sweet Laura is rather inclined to do; for one loses one's own dignity by stooping to battle with an inferior, who spits and fumes, but who is quite

incapable of doing us any real harm. Of course, when I have come in contact with such people in my daily path through life, I have always thought it best to draw aside and let them have the king's highway all to themselves, as the man did with the donkey, that disputed the passage with him, observing that he had long 'made it a rule never to argue with any of *his* family,' but, darling, when these notions belong to our own relations, or connections, we must show a little more toleration for them."

"Uncle, how wise and good you are! and how I love you! The little good there may be in me I owe to your good example, and sweet instructions. I always feel better after being in your society; and if aunt were here at this moment, I almost feel as if I could kiss her to wipe away my nasty, cross, spiteful speeches. Uncle, surely the world holds no other man like you, so good yourself, so *hard* on yourself, and yet so charitable in your judgment of others, and always ready to find an excuse for their failings. If you were not my uncle, I believe I should be in love with you! but as you are, I shall never be in love, or marry any man; to me they all come so below you, my ideal! And faults one can tolerate in a woman, I never

could in a man; he must be perfection to come up to my ideas, and all the men I have met so far are puppies, pigmies, poor, weak, silly creatures, only good enough to peel potatoes for one at a picnic, amuse the company with petty scandal, and waltzing machines at a ball!"

"Oh! Laura, I don't like to hear you speak like that, it is the dearest wish of my heart that I should live long enough to see you, one day, married. It is woman's mission; she is not strong enough to fight the battle of life alone, she needs the protection of a husband, the love of children, to bring forth all her best qualities, and to make her happy. It is not well for man to 'live alone,' but it is far worse for a woman, and I should be utterly miserable if I thought your life were to be a solitary one; no, my sweet love, I must give you away some day into the safe keeping of some honest man, who could not do otherwise than love you, dear, and be proud of you, too! Never speak like that again, dear, about marriage, that most divine of all human institutions, though, alas! too often profaned!"

"Well, old darling, I won't then, and I will try and think better of men for your dear sake."

II.

A TRIP TO PARIS.

THE next morning was fine and bright, and Mr. Tait and Laura, with her maid and governess, took their departure from Charing Cross by the mail train for Paris, that modern Babylon, where they arrived in due time to find their comfortable apartments, at Meurice's good old-fashioned hotel, awaiting them.

After a bath and a change of toilet, Laura, with her uncle, sallied forth to dine at one of the fashionable restaurants on the brilliantly lighted boulevards.

If Laura was admired in London she was all but mobbed in Paris; where Frenchmen do not consider it rude, or in any way wanting in the rules of etiquette, to stare pretty women out of

countenance, put their greasy moustachios under their bonnets, and openly exclaim —

"Dieu! la jolie fille!" "Belle comme une ange!" &c., and familiarly edge up, or walk in front of them, continually looking back to still drink in the beauties of the picture.

This worried Laura a little, but she soon paid no more attention to these little *crapauds*, and not so much as if they had been real ones. Her uncle sometimes lost his patience, and exclaimed —

"D—n that man! if he doesn't move on, and pretty soon too, I'll knock him down!"

"Nonsense, darling," Laura would say, clinging nevertheless, and holding firmly on to her uncle's arm, for fear he might carry his threat into execution, "they don't mean any harm, poor little things! You see I am to them a sort of female giraffe, unusually tall for their nation, and being English they are in a way astonished; they will get used to us in time, and go on attending to their business."

"I am blessed if I see that they appear to have any to attend to, the lazy brutes! their sole occupation seems to be to go loafing about, staring at, and insulting women. I shall be glad, dear, when this

Paris business is over, and I get you safe back again amongst our own country people. I'm shot, if our railway porters are not a better type of mankind than these dressed up monkeys—dressed in such clothes, too! they are perfectly loathsome. Laura, if you married a Frenchman I would cut you off with a shilling."

"Then probably the Frenchman would have nothing to say to me, dear; it would be the quickest way of settling the matter."

After a few days' stay in Paris with his niece, Mr. Tait returned to London where important business awaited him.

Laura missed him fearfully, but she was not a weak, foolish girl, she knew what she had come to Paris for, and she was determined to make the most of her stay; so she sought out the best masters, and worked hard, and in the late afternoons when study was over would generally take long drives in the Bois de Boulogne. She engaged, by the month, the most charming miniature brougham, and usually took her governess, Miss Wardell, with her, but she often preferred to go alone, with no companion save her Blenheim spaniel; then she would make the coachman pull up at one of those exquisitely tangled little paths

which abound in that lovely wood, and getting out lose herself in its many windings, dreaming about those she had left in England. Her thoughts did not stray to many, they were principally centred in her beloved uncle (without him her life was sad and incomplete), and she gave a wandering thought or two to poor Jack sometimes. It would have been quite a treat to her to see his honest, ruddy face, and his rough ways even would have been refreshing compared to the obsequious, fawning politeness of the French *petits crevés* who surrounded her on all sides.

Some of them bolder than the rest would follow her in her solitary strolls, and bowing down to the ground, hat in hand, endeavour to enter into conversation on "the beauty of her dog," or, it was "in danger of being stolen, its rare beauty would be sure to make it an object of pursuit, and if madame would allow him he would suggest that it might be safer to keep a chain on her beautiful *chienne*," &c., &c.

To all these advances Laura would courteously bow her acknowledgment of the kind intent, but with a few polite words cut the conversation short by bowing and passing on, and soon afterwards get into her carriage and drive home.

Not unfrequently her *coupé* was followed, her name and address found out, and a fire of small scented feminine-looking notes, sealed with flaming coronets, appear the next morning on her breakfast plate. Combustible expressions of devoted and eternal love, with suicidal tendencies if frustrated; imploring the honour of an interview, sometimes appointing a place of meeting in the retired precincts of her beloved Bois, which prevented her taking her afternoon walk in it for that day; not unfrequently tiny parcels appeared, enclosing valuable articles of jewelry, a diamond star or butterfly, all which precious offerings Laura would tell her maid to lock away until their owners had made known their addresses, which they generally did after a time (finding the bait had not the desired effect), when they were returned in registered envelopes.

Laura went the round of the theatres too, always accompanied by her governess, Miss Wardell, who had arrived at that period of life when romance fails to charm those who have never acted a part in its drama, so they give it up, discard it as utterly false and ridiculous; and Miss Wardell, although a good soul, had always been plain and

unattractive, and now that she was close upon fifty she was too matter-of-fact to make a fool of herself, as she used to say, and believe in such rubbish. So she usually nodded by Laura's side during the long soul-stirring French drama, which Laura herself delighted in, and enjoyed a very comfortable sleep until she was suddenly aroused by a daintily gloved hand applying a gentle tap to her "melancholy nose," and a general movement in the house, and Laura's silvery voice saying—"Miss Wardell, dear, it is all over," when she would pull herself together, and say—

"Dear me! why bless my soul, child, I do believe I've been asleep."

Then Laura, who was a tease at heart, would quiet her friend's nerves, and succeed in putting her thoroughly at her ease, by adding—

"Yes, and snoring too!"

One night at a *première*, at the Vaudeville Laura, whose rapt attention seldom wandered from the stage, could not help being attracted by the focus of a pair of opera glasses continually directed on her from a box on the grand tiers, by a man, who, with an elegantly dressed woman by his side, were the only occupants.

The man was young and handsome, very distinguished looking, and unmistakably an Englishman; and his companion, one of those gay women of pleasure at whose shrine rich Frenchmen prostrate themselves and their fortunes. The fair Phryne devours bank notes as rapidly as she makes bonbons disappear between her pearly teeth; and as they go she stretches out her hand for more, and throws over the men who have lavished their fortunes on her, if they have no more to give, as she would cast off an old slipper, and turns to the next rising sun of that *Jeunesse Dorée* whose ambition it is to be seen by the side, and ruined by the reigning *cocotte* of the day.

A celebrated one was known one night at a supper, in an intoxicated frolic, to hold up the key of her chamber, and offer it for that one evening to the highest bidder. The sum reached the fabulous amount of ten thousand pounds, and the "curled darling," who, through vanity, had outrun his companions in folly, triumphantly led off his prize, who, after allowing him to open her door, slammed it in his face, and fastened it on the other side. He paid down his money, however, and kept the *dénouement* to himself, and

would have paid the sum twice over rather than expose himself to the ridicule of all the Paris world of fashion—for if there is one thing a Frenchman cannot face, it is ridicule.

As Laura took one survey of the occupants of the box, she instinctively took in the situation, and for the rest of the evening fixed her attention exclusively on the play, which was crowned a success amidst deafening applause.

The next morning a note was brought to her and on opening it she read :—

"DEAR MISS STACEY,

"I hope you will excuse the liberty I am taking in writing to you, but I once had the honour of being introduced to you in London, at the house of, I think, a relation of yours, Mrs. Norton. Would you consider that I was taking an unwarrantable liberty if, on the strength of that introduction, I presume to ask you to allow me to call? It is so refreshing to see an English face in one's wanderings through foreign parts, and I should look upon it as a very great honour and pleasure, if you would allow me to renew my acquaintance with you. I dare say you do not remember me, but your face is one never to be forgotten.

"I am in Paris only for a few days, when I return to London, and should be too happy if I could be of any service to you, either here or there.

"My servant will wait for an answer.

"Pray believe me,

"Your obedient servant,

"HUBERT DE VERE.

"Hotel Bristol."

Then it flashed across Laura's memory that she had seen that good-looking, fair-haired young Englishman, who was at the theatre, somewhere before; then remembered that it was one afternoon at Queen's Gate he had come in, and been introduced to her; she had thought no more about him, and she did not particularly care about renewing her acquaintance with him, especially after seeing in whose company he was the evening before. But Laura was no prude, and she had always instinctively felt that there are certain phases in men's lives that women had better ignore. So she penned him a few lines in answer, saying her time was greatly occupied, but she would be pleased to see him any day he might call, if she happened to be at home.

The next afternoon, just as Laura was fastening a big bunch of violets in her bonnet strings, pre-

paratory to taking her afternoon drive, the sitting-room door was thrown open and Mr. de Vere announced.

Laura advanced a few steps to meet him, her little gloved hand extended, over which he bent so low that his lips nearly touched it.

There was a brilliant fascination about Hubert de Vere which fairly carried away women's hearts as if by storm; he was gay, frivolous, heartless, and yet no woman had ever been able, it was said, to withstand the winning grace of his presence. Some had endeavoured to reform this young Don Juan, by warbling into his ear sweet lectures on "morals," but after listening for a very short space of time, the blue eyes (those particular steel-blue eyes, which never *could* be faithful to one if they tried), which had gradually been getting more and more drowsy, would suddenly light up with a flash at the happy recollection of an appointment, all but forgotten, and bidding his fair lecturer a hasty adieu, he would take himself off, leaving a dull, black void in the room (and too often in the fair one's heart!) which no other presence was sunny enough to replace. Hubert de Vere was a child of air, born of a sunbeam, just released from zephyr's amorous embrace. A very

soap bubble of brilliant hues, which, if you were content to gaze on it, well and good, but if you tried to clasp it it evaporated between your fingers and the sparkling vision was gone! A gay butterfly, that loved to float in on the ambent air through the open window of a lady's boudoir, attracted by the perfume of her presence, settle on a flower just the space of a few flying seconds, and drink in its sweets (too often leaving behind the bitterness of a sting), then float out again into the ethereal air in search of "fresh fields and pastures new."

Only four-and-twenty, owner of a large fortune and beautiful estate, scheming mothers had vainly set their nets to catch this matrimonial prize, but Hubert's tendencies were decidedly not matrimonially inclined, or young ladies "just out" his particular fancy—of the two evils he would prefer the society of their "mammas." Gay young widows were his particular fancy! but no woman had ever been known to fix his volatile affections for more than three days consecutively; yet there was a certain sort of faithfulness about him too, for, unlike most men, who have an inordinate dislike to *réchauffés en amour*, after abandoning an Ariadne, who was palling upon him, and beginning to bore him to death, "you know," he would

frequently return to the deserted fair one, and for the space ofa few days be again devoted to her, whispering soft nothings into her perfumed locks, arrange her opera cloak on her shoulders with the tender solicitude of a devoted lover, and for the time being appear to have no eyes for any other woman, until another pretty face caught his fancy, when, with his usual excuse, the sudden recollection of an appointment, he was off and gone from her side like a flash, and devoting himself to the new empress of his affections.

With all his faults, which would make a nature superior to such frivolities feel at times a certain contempt for him, still it was not possible to hate Hubert de Vere, for in his very vagaries and inconstancies there was a certain amount of honesty—he had never told a woman yet that he was in love with her; he thought women beautiful toys and playthings, necessary to make life pleasant, they charmed his senses, but failed to touch his heart (if he *had* one which he had never been able himself to discover). He was the life of every picnic, the soul of every party, the star of every entertainment which was sure to become a success when he appeared on the *tapis*, with his cheery face and the radiance of his youth and good looks

and flow of animal spirits, before which flatness and dulness were dispelled like a mist before the rising sun. Such was the man who suddenly appeared in Laura Stacey's life, and henceforth became devoted to her society.

Some might have considered him a rather dangerous companion for one so young and unprotected as she was, but there they would have made a great mistake. Laura was above the ordinary run of young girls of her age; she was a woman in thought, in ideas, and in her knowledge of the world, acquired through profound and extensive reading. Her solitary life had allowed her mind to develope itself and attain to heights of thought and philosophy beyond the ken of the ordinary young girl of the period. She was ambitious by nature, with that ambition which soars, not that "worldliness" which stoops. Too often the two are confounded, but true ambition is one of the master passions of a noble nature, striving to attain all that is above it in goodness, greatness, perfection; and "worldliness" is that petty vice which rules small minds, which grovels to pick up what it can find. So the companionship between a woman of Laura's stamp and a man of Hubert's did no harm to either; on

the contrary, it made him, if possible, less frivolous, and his sweet and gentle ways with her awakened in her heart a sad sympathy and regret, and at the same time a certain tender interest for this gay young butterfly of fashion, whom she would have wished, if she could, to awaken to a higher sense of feeling as to the aim and sacredness of life, which he treated with such reckless *insouciance*.

It cannot be denied, however, that Laura's refined nature, so keenly sensitive to beauty in every form, could not help being captivated by de Vere's wonderful good looks, which were pleasant to gaze on. If only his mind had equalled in beauty his face and form, I fear she would have given in to his wonderful fascinations, disarmed, a captive added to the list of his many others; but that never could be, and, alive as she was to the young godlike beauty of his person, her soul could not surrender itself except to one she felt was her equal, if not her superior, so the line was drawn at friendship on her side, but, alas! as a matter of course when a man is thwarted, devoted love (as far as his nature was capable of the feeling) on his, towards this young girl who towered so much above all women he had ever met with, in beauty of face and mind.

III.

A PROPOSAL.

"Mr. de Vere," said Laura one day, "don't you think you have rather prolonged what you at first said were to be your 'few days' stay in Paris?' When are you going back? It is now nearly six weeks since you first came to see me."

"Is it, though? Time, my dear child, was made for its slaves, and I am yours! You chain me to your side, for the very reason, I believe, that you want me gone! This is a lovely June day. Let us drive to the Bois and dine there—do!"

"Very well, I will consent on the condition you will go first with me to see my patients at the hospital; it is my day, and the poor things look out for me. There is a young woman there whose face haunts me, poor thing! She has some spinal

complaint which has kept her lying there for months past, with nothing to look at but those dreary walls, and nothing to listen to but the moans of the other sufferers. Oh! Mr. de Vere, in the midst of our own giddy lives, if we could only realise the amount of pain and misery going on around us, it would surely make us think a little more, and *do* a little more, where we can, to alleviate poor, suffering humanity!"

"It is very good of you to feel in that way, as you do, for others, but my dear girl, after all, what good can you really achieve when you come to think of it? I doubt if the small amount of comfort, or happiness, your presence amongst such people may be, is not more than counterbalanced by the harm it does to your own self. I always know when you have been on one of your errands of mercy by the saddened expression of your face, which is always too inclined to be sad at the best; it depresses your spirits and injures your health. No, believe me, do what you can by giving your money to those who are fit to distribute it properly, but, child, do not go to those places yourself, I entreat you!"

"Oh! Mr. de Vere, if I can bring a little pleasant change into the dreary lives where there is so

much suffering, by the sacrifice of a few hours out of my own luxurious, selfish life, how cowardly I should think myself were I to refrain, and hold back, just to save myself! Just look at me, with everything around me that wealth can give, the protection of a home, and my uncle's love, which is more to me than all the world; what have I ever done to deserve all this? And might I not myself have been born that poor, pale-faced girl Louise, whom I take such an interest in?—an orphan, with no friends save those who are struggling as hard as she herself was to gain a livelihood, when illness struck her down, and yet she is by nature a delicate woman, as I am. Well, I think, if I were in her place, it would bring some sunshine into my miserable life to see a more fortunate sister go out of her way to come and see me, to give me a word of *love*, which is more welcome to the ear than the 'chink' of golden sovereigns, though they shall not be spared."

"Laura!" exclaimed Hubert, fairly carried away by her beauty, and the pathos in her voice, "Laura! will you extend your charity to me, and give me the riches of that heart of yours, that I should prize more than all else this world could hold! Oh, darling, you must know that my love

for you has been growing beyond my control day by day; I dare say you think me a vain, foolish, aimless fool! but, if you would only love me I should become something better—oh, Laura, my love! be my wife."

Hubert stretched his arms towards her, and in one flash, had her lithe form within their stronghold before she had realised what had happened. Then she placed her little hands on each of his broad shoulders, and with her face raised to his, but with a look on it that made him feel more utterly hopeless and lonely than if an ocean had divided them, said—

"Hubert, I love you dearly, but not with that love which is somewhere slumbering in my soul, and which may, one day, awaken and claim its mastery! No, dear boy, it can never be, and believe me it would be cruel in me to give you any hope that I can ever be anything more to you than a loving sister and friend; that I shall always be, if you will let me."

Hubert's heart was beating like a sledge-hammer, and on his face passion was working its mad havoc. Still, for one short moment, he allowed his senses to take in their fill from the contact of that beloved form whose heart was near his own;

then realized that it would never throb there so close again. The faint perfume she always wore rose like an incense about him, and all but made him reel and forget himself once more, in a wild outburst of passion; then gently unclasping her arms from his shoulders, he led her to a seat, and walked himself off to the window where he remained looking out with his fair young head bowed down over his clasped hands.

The poor butterfly had been severely scorched at Love's torch, and its gay wings for the moment were useless to it, and hung drooping against its poor sides.

"Now Hubert, let this be all over; a moment of folly to be forgotten in a long life of dear friendship. You know: 'L'âmitié est l'amour sans ses aîles.' Don't try to let me think less well of you than I do, by knocking under to a foolish whim of fancy—do not let it spoil our sweet intercourse, dear friend, or I must never see you again."

"It is all very well for a woman to talk in that way," said Hubert turning round and facing her, "but you can't understand what I feel! You have dealt me a blow to fell an ox, and you expect me to recover myself in the flash of an eye! But

I shall be all right presently, child, if you will leave me and go and put on your things, and I will go with you to see your fair Louise, and we will drive to the Bois afterwards, and I'll try to feel that you are not beside me, or else that you are short, fat, and ugly—anything! only don't send me away altogether from you."

Laura stood one moment thinking she should like to go up to him and tell him he was very good, and that she was very fond of him in a way, but felt it might, perhaps, be dangerous just at present, so went out of the room to put on her cloak and bonnet, and when she reappeared, "Richard was himself again," and in his usual cheery spirits, with no other signs of the storm that had raged in his soul but the rather ragged looking end of one of his tawny moustachios which he had nearly bitten off. So these two young people stepped lightly into the brougham that was awaiting them, loaded with presents for the poor people they were going to visit, and drove through crowded streets, noisy with the brutal cries and slashing whips of French drivers, into the court yard of the Hospital de l'Hotel Dieu, and once within its precincts all was quiet again.

The poor inmates gazed on these two creatures

coming to see them out of another world to their sordid own, in rapt astonishment and admiration. It was like a ray of sunshine penetrating into the gloom of their monotonous existence, and as Laura stooped to speak soft kind words, her scented breath caressing their wan cheeks, it suggested to their imaginations, floating dreams, which carried them far away from those cold walls, into smiling fields gay with wild flowers and golden sanded shores washed by blue seas, with the fair arch of Heaven above their heads, and the warbling songs of birds.

Hubert, too, in his gentle, soft way, took notice of all, especially of the "fair Louise," who looked upon him as a young god, just descended from Olympus, as Emeralda gazed on Phœbus, the god of her idolatry; she could not have understood it had she been told that mortal flesh, in the shape of that young English "milady," had that very morning withstood those charms of his and not slid down a vanquished slave for ever at his feet.

Laura left several glittering "napoleons" amongst her friends to provide them little comforts, to which Hubert also contributed; and then they drove off back through the streets, away down the regal Avenue de l'Imperative, and

gained at last the pretty restaurant by the lake in the Bois, where, after ordering their dinner, they took a stroll before satisfying, by this time, their rather keen appetite; after which they returned home, under the light of the stars, and Laura dropped Hubert at his hotel before she returned to her own.

The next few days passed by and no visit from Mr. de Vere.

Laura began to wonder, and missed, too, his cheery face coming in upon her, all smiles and good spirits, and suggesting a walk, or a drive, or a "drama" as he called it; but she soon settled down to her studies, and thought perhaps it was as well he should keep away for a bit.

One day, about a week later, she received the following letter from "the butterfly" who had winged his way back to English shores:—

"Oatlands Castle,

"Derbyshire.

"My Dear Laura,

"May I call you 'Laura?' I think you said I might? Well, here I am with the Channel between us, so I can no more plague you by making a fool of myself, which I shall do to the end of all time about you.

"After saying 'good-bye' to you at the door of my hotel, the night of that one day in my life never to be forgotten—for I have had you in my arms, and that scent of yours is about me still (what is it, I wonder?) I found a letter from Lady Margaret Fletcher awaiting me (she is a dear little fair-haired fairy, you know) imploring me to come over to her at once and help her with a grand tennis court *fête* she is giving to a house full of people—so I started the next morning' and I am on duty, you see. The Duchess of Rosemount is here, she is a sort of second cousin of your father's, and I have been talking to her about you, so your little ears should have been burning. She is wild to see you, though, woman like, inclined to be a wee bit jealous too; but she is not a bad sort, and very devoted to your humble servant, which is rather a bore sometimes. She says she is going to call on you when you return to town, and would like to present you at the next drawing-room. I shall see my Laura taking all London by storm with her beauty, and those charming ways of hers, which no other woman I have ever met possesses —all the men will go mad about you, child!—will your little head stand it I wonder? or will

you remain cold and passionless, and deaf to all other entreaties, as you have been to mine? Some more fortunate fellow will succeed, I suppose, where I have failed, and I shall have to look on and see my beautiful gardinia worn on another's breast, and pale beneath his kisses. Well, if he is deserving of her I must learn to forgive him in time, I suppose.

"When are you coming back? Paris must be getting horribly hot and disagreeable now, and I don't think altogether healthy. I called to see your uncle when I passed through town, but missed him.

"Good-bye, my dear,

"Always your devoted,

"HUBERT DE VERE."

Laura was, indeed, wearying of her stay in Paris.

She had studied and fairly achieved the object of her visit. She spoke French quite fluently now, she had from childhood always had a French resident governess, so that she had acquired a perfect accent, so rare to meet with amongst English people.

She had devoted herself to her singing lessons. Her voice was a contralto, with those soft, low

notes which "take the prisoned soul and lap it in Elysium," and are the sure index of a deep and passionate nature, for a voice without feeling is like a mind without a soul—a jar in Nature. Her voice was one of those which hold the hearer spellbound; and after listening to which, to utter even a murmur of applause would be but to desecrate the silence still vibrating with the dying echoes.

Laura's voice in speaking was one of her greatest charms, low, impressive, gentle, tender, at times, when under strong emotion, reaching those deep tones of pathos which unconsciously awaken a corresponding sympathy in the soul of the listener.

Her voice was one of her sources of power and fascination, especially over men, always keenly alive to a caress of the senses; and it is doubtful if, of all the senses, one of the most acute is not that of sound. Great beauty attracts, but that alone never kept a man's fancy or retained his devotion. It is the secret of the power of some plain women who have turned men's heads before now, and have had a lifelong hold over them, that they have charmed by deeper seated spells than those of mere beauty, to which the eye may

become so accustomed in time that it may even pall on the senses if other charms are not brought to bear. The Mary Stuarts, the Cleopatras, those women who have electrified the world, and who have played at "pitch and toss" with men's lives, must have possessed them one and all.

There is no use in denying the fact, Laura missed her companion, Hubert de Vere; the days seemed long, tedious, dull without his presence. She was not going to mistake the feeling, and fancy herself "in love" because the shadow of love's wings had passed over her life, or take it for the reality; but she was weary to death of Paris; its hollow pleasures and glittering show left her heart unsatisfied. She had decidedly *le mal du pays*, and was longing for home, the dear old house in Russell Square, with her uncle's love to shield her from all fits of depression, so she wrote him a letter, telling him how "home sick" she was, and how much she was longing, beyond words, to see his dear face again. As a matter of course Mr. Tait wrote back:—

"My Darling,

"You shall return home at once if you wish. I shall be with you by next Saturday

evening, and we will come back together. I have taken a moor in Scotland for the next four months, where you shall rest from your hard studies and do just as you please. Some rumour has reached me that Hubert de Vere has been your constant companion for the last three months in Paris. Has your wayward little heart been caught? If so, dear, I hope it may be for your happiness; but de Vere is rather a wild bird to tame, I fear. He has rather a light name amongst women, and I should tremble to think my dear girl had pinned her faith on one who is unworthy of her. However, I leave all to your good sense. Hubert would not be marrying you for your money at least, for he has a princely fortune of his own, and if he really loves you, love may do wonders, and a reformed rake, they say, always makes the best husband. Well, time will show, and I would not thwart my dear child, but leave all to her own good sense and loyal heart.

"Her affectionate uncle,

"G. TAIT."

To which Laura replied:—

"You need not be alarmed, old darling, about me. I have escaped unsinged from Mr. de Vere's

fascinations, and shall return to you heartwhole, but I am very fond of him in a way and he of me. We are the very best of friends, and shall always remain so, I trust. There is a wonderful deal of good in him, and to me he has been most sweet and courteous. I am looking forward longingly to your arrival. All chat when we meet.

"Your loving niece,

"LAURA."

So Laura, accompanied by her uncle, bade adieu to Paris, and was sadly missed by poor people, whose friend she always was, and who simply worshipped her, and found herself once more on English shores, and listening to its familiar accents; and what more welcome sound is there to an English ear, exiled for a time from the old country, than to once more hear the honest ring of English voices?

They arrived in Russell Square, driving through rows of closely shut houses, whose occupants had already left town (except those who were hiding in the back kitchens) in search of country breezes after a hot, rushing, close season in pent-up streets.

The old house, left so long to the sole occupation of a man and servants, was lacking in that glow of

comfort which a woman's presence alone can diffuse; the thousand little knick-knacks put away out of sight, the absence of flowers, the blinds pulled up to the very top, and the glare of day shining in to help make everything look more dreary. But the next day Laura's presence soon gave the wanting touches, and the rooms assumed gradually their old look of comfort and refinement.

IV.

MARY WAKEFIELD.

LAURA was arranging her flowers the next morning, when Jack came bounding into the room as unwieldy as a young Newfoundland dog, and welcomed his cousin back with boisterous delight.

"I have been awfully dull without you, Laura, and counting the days for your return. I know you don't mind my smoking a cigarette," said he, settling himself down in a comfortable arm-chair, "and I want a chat with you. I have something to tell you, my dear; I want your advice. I have got somewhat into a mess, or rather, I have got someone else into one, I fear, which is far worse."

"Well, Jack, what is it? Tell me."

"You see, Laura, I am in the habit of taking

mother's plethoric pug out for a constitutional in Kensington Gardens of a morning, and I naturally look around and see what there is to see, which is generally not much; but several mornings running I happened to come upon a very pretty little face, belonging to a young girl who was accompanying a lot of troublesome children. I could not help remarking her, you know, because she was so very pretty, and jolly-looking altogether. Well, one morning the children were more troublesome than ever, and it was more than she could do to manage them; one would run after my dog, who, unaccustomed to this sort of amusement, cut it short by bolting out of the gates into the middle of the road, and the child, a little boy, after it; and it would have been his last run in this world but for me. A carriage and pair were coming full tilt upon him. I had him from between the horses' legs in a jiffy, and could not help giving him a precious good shake, too; troublesome little brat! The little governess (for I know now that she is a governess, and her name is Mary Wakefield) nearly fainted from fright, and all but in my arms, Laura! But I led her to a seat, and when she had recovered herself, she told me the children belonged to a Mr. and Mrs. Harwood, and that

she was their governess, and I should think she had a bad time of it with the devils from what I have seen of them. She was going on to tell me that they were only in town on a visit with some other people, who live at Kensington, and that she was nursery governess, and the Lord deliver her say I; and just as she was telling me all this, and thanking me in a pretty, shy, blushing sort of a way, a Bath chair made its sudden appearance on the scene, in which was seated an old lady with a most forbidding countenance and florid fat face, who all at once spying us, bore down upon us, calling out in a shrieking voice —

"'Miss Wakefield! who are you talking to there? Aren't you ashamed of yourself to be neglecting those dear children and going on in that disgraceful way with gentlemen you pick up in the Park? It is fortunate that I have found out your goings on!'

"Whereupon she gave a dab to her nose, intended for her spectacles, and sitting very bolt upright, shaking with rage, awaited an explanation. I flourished off my hat and endeavoured to explain matters to the irate old cat, but she looked at me as if I were the greatest scoundrel unhung! and, as she did not appear to pay the

very smallest attention to what I was saying, I took myself off, leaving the poor little girl in her clutches, like a mouse between a cat's paws. The old wretch was the grandmother I heard afterwards.

"Well, I did not see anything more of Miss Wakefield for about a week, though before that she and the children were every morning in Kensington Gardens. At the end of that time, however, she turned up again, with the brats as troublesome as ever. When she espied me she blushed crimson, gave me a little bow, and was going to slide off, but I wanted to know what the old lady had said of me; so I went up to her and said that I hoped she had not been the worse for her fright of the other day.

"To make a long story short, her employers have given her the sack, and all on my account, because I was seen speaking to her, and, of course, if it had not been for me and my dog that would never have happened, and I am rather miserable about it. I found out her address and wrote to her, enclosing a 'tenner,' putting it, as well as I could, that it was a little present from one who had more money than he knew what to do with, and that it was just to help her on a bit

until she got another situation. But she returned me the beastly money! I have also found out that the people she is living with are acquaintances of my mother's, and live at Brixton.

"Now do you think, Laura, that on the strength of that acquaintanceship, you could go down there one day (they are back there now) and try to smooth matters, and say that the poor little thing was not to blame in any way, and ask for her to be forgiven?"

"Why, Jack, with all these things, family pedigrees, &c., which you have 'found out,' you are a regular detective! Certainly, Jack; if you think I could do any good, I will go."

So it was arranged that Jack should drive his cousin down to Hollywood Lodge, Brixton.

The very next day, at three o'clock, Jack came in his mail phaeton and a couple of screws, over the purchase of which he had been "done," being no better judge of horseflesh than a "middy," and about as good a whip; and after nearly upsetting her several times by charging "trams," coal waggons, &c., they escaped with their lives, and pulled up with a jerk enough to dislocate their spines, in front of a large house with porticos, forming one of a line of "dittos," all exactly similar, uncom-

promising, stiff, cold, unideal and unsympathetic, but highly *respectable*, like the class of persons they held between their solid, well-built walls.

A parian marble draped figure, under a glass shade, appeared through the large plate-glass of the front window, which gave Laura the shivers. The groom got down and rang the bell, and asked if Mrs. Harwood was at home, and on being told that she was, Miss Stacey sent in her card, telling the pretty little maidservant, with her dainty cap and ribbons, who opened the door, to ask her mistress if she would kindly receive her.

The lady of the house, who had peeped through the curtains of an upper room window, and beheld a distinguished-looking lady seated in a "private carriage," thought, under the circumstances, that she would see her.

So Jack remained in the phaeton, and Laura was ushered into an upholsterified-looking drawing-room, with pictures on the walls, in better frames than their merits deserved, a few handsomely bound books arranged symetrically on a round table, like the spokes of a wheel, and a poor canary bird shrieking its little life out at its own captivity, and rebelling generally against its

fate, as to where its line had been cast by hard Providence.

Laura quite understood its feelings on the subject, and thought *she* would have screeched too if she had been in its place, pent up in such a hard, cold atmosphere, with not even a flower about in the room.

Presently the door opened, and in bounced and flounced a vulgar, over-dressed woman, about six-and-thirty; she took in at a glance the high-bred air of her visitor, and hated her from that moment.

"Good afternoon; may I ask what is your business, and to whom I am indebted for the honour of this visit?" and, as Laura had risen when Mrs. Harwood had entered the room, adding in a patronizing way, "Oh! pray be seated."

Laura explained, in her own quiet manner, that she had come at the request of her cousin, Mr. Norton, who, he feared, had been the unfortunate means of injury to a young lady residing as governess with Mrs. Harwood, by being seen in conversation with her.

"You mean that person, Miss Wakefield, who is my children's nursery governess, I presume?"

"Yes, I fancy that is the young lady's name."

"Oh! it is very good of you, I am sure, to trouble yourself about the matter and try to clear the character of that young woman, but if it is to ask me to retain her in my service I cannot oblige you. I don't blame the young gentleman, I am sure! Men will be men, and, as I always say, a lady need never be insulted unless she chooses, and looks right and left, and ogles about instead of looking straight before her as every modest woman would do."

"I have no reason to believe, from what my cousin tells me, that Miss Wakefield did anything unbecoming, or acted otherwise than a lady should do; the children were difficult to manage, and if it had not been for Mr. Norton, I believe your child stood a great risk of being run over by a passing carriage."

"Yes, all very well, but that would never have happened if Miss Wakefield had been doing her duty, and what she is paid to do, instead of speaking to strange men whom she happens to meet in the public parks!"

"Miss Wakefield had not spoken to my cousin until he had saved your child."

"Take my advice, young lady," said Mrs. Harwood, "and don't you go and stand up for any

young woman a young gentleman like your cousin chooses to form the acquaintance of in the public streets, or you may find you have made a mistake one of these days!"

Old Mrs. Sharp, the grandmother, who had been listening to the conversation with her ear glued to the key hole of the next room, now bundled in, and without even bowing, at once struck into the conversation.

"I beg your pardon, but as I have just now seen a gentleman outside, and recognize him as the one who was talking in Kensington Gardens to that little hussy, Miss Wakefield, I think it right to tell you, Maria, that I hope you will put a stop to his hanging about this place until she has left it. A most indelicate young girl, and to think that she has still nearly a month to remain with those blessed innocent children, it makes me shudder. I can't think how any lady with proper feeling can take her part" (with a severe look at Laura).

Miss Stacey smiled to herself as she thought that these people decidedly formed a part of that long-eared family, with whom her uncle had advised her never to argue.

So she merely apologised for having called, and

asked if she might be allowed to speak to Mary Wakefield.

"Oh dear, certainly not!" said old Mrs. Sharp. "The children are at their lessons, and I should not think I was doing my duty to her by encouraging such stuck-up ideas in a person of her condition, and flatter her vanity by allowing her to receive visitors in my house, and 'carriage people' too! There would be no doing anything with her for the rest of her stay in our family."

Laura smiled again, and rising took her departure, determined not to be thwarted of her kind intentions towards the little governess by these ill-bred *nouveaux riches*.

Jack was sorry when he heard that Laura's visit had been useless.

"Well, I cannot do any more, can I?" said he. "I should not mind if I knew that the poor little girl would not find herself shot out of that infernal house before she got another situation to go to. I wish she had accepted that money from me! I wonder if she would take it from you if you sent it to her, eh, Laura?"

"My dear Jack, you ought to know by this time that I am not one to be balked in anything

I make up my mind to, and by such people as the Harwoods whom I consider have been extremely rude to me, by not allowing me to speak to Miss Wakefield when I requested them to let me do so. But I shall see her though, notwithstanding; and more than that, I shall take care that the poor child is not turned out of her present home unless she has another one to go to, for I will take her into my own house rather than that should happen. And those people, I suppose, call themselves Christians, and thank God they are better than their neighbours, and go regularly to church every Sunday, and yet would turn a young girl out of doors into the streets, not caring what became of her as long as they were freed from her, their responsibility ending when they paid her her wages! Don't trouble yourself any more about Miss Wakefield, Jack. I will look after her, I promise you, and I think for her sake and under the circumstances, that my protection will be better for her than yours. So leave her entirely to me, and don't think any more about it."

"Laura, you are simply an angel, the best sort I ever met, and I am proud of my sweet 'coz.'

Good-bye, dear," said Jack as he handed her down from the phaeton, and she entered the house where her uncle was awaiting her return.

Obedient to a letter from Miss Stacey, Mary Wakefield presented herself one morning in Russell Square. She was shown into Laura's room where the blinds were down and a faint breath of air, heavy with the perfume of flowers in the boxes outside the open windows, fanned dreamily the leaves of an open book she had been reading, which was by her side.

Laura looked up as the girl entered and thought she had rarely seen so pretty a picture as she made in the dark embrasure of the doorway.

Mary Wakefield was rather under the middle height, formed like a young Hebe; her plain, close-fitting cotton dress revealing the contour of a perfect bust, and round waist, small, without being deformed by tight lacing; a neat ankle, and delicious little foot just peeped from beneath the kilting of her frock.

She was a blonde with that fair, wavy, cloudy hair streaked with yellow which no dye can imitate, and which reminds one of a golden corn field gently stirred with summer breezes. Her skin and complexion were dazzlingly fair, only

to be compared to the delicate sheen of white satin on which a rose light is cast. Her eyes were her great beauty, dark, liquid, ever varying in colour, and set in a perfect forest of black, curling lashes. A small nose, slightly *retroussé*, gave the finishing touch to this Greuze-like face, which was continually changing in its expression as a quick circulation, added to a timid disposition, sent the blood leaping into her cheeks, and deepened every tone of colouring.

It was a witching face, and Laura thought Jack showed no such bad taste in having singled it out, and, a thought crossed her mind that this young girl might prove rather dangerous in her beauty to poor Jack's unsophisticated heart if he happened to be much thrown in her society!

Laura asked the young girl many questions and found that she was an orphan, her father had been a captain in the navy, and her mother had died very young of consumption. She had only one brother, who had a situation as clerk in some house of business in the City. She had, she said, that very morning got another situation as companion with an old lady, a widow, going abroad; she had seen the advertisement in the *Times*, and had gone about it at once on her way to Russell

Square, and the old lady appeared pleased with her, and engaged her then and there, on the condition, of course, that her character would prove satisfactory, and she was going to see Mrs. Harwood about it that very afternoon.

Laura told her that if there arose any difficulty about it she was to refer Lady Charlton to her and she would explain everything.

So the two girls parted with a sort of regret. Laura endeavoured to make Mary accept a little present in the shape of a five-pound note, but could not succeed in persuading her to take it, as she insisted she was not in want of it, but promised Miss Stacey that if she were at any time in difficulty she would take the liberty of asking her for assistance and advice.

As they stood together near the door before parting Laura impulsively stooped and kissed the pretty face upraised to hers. Miss Wakefield blushed under the caress, and looked just like a wild rose beside a stately lily.

"Dear young lady," she said, "I cannot tell you how deeply I feel the kind interest you have shown me. So many people, I fear, in your place, would have judged me less generously and been inclined to accuse me, as Mrs. Harwood does, of indiscreet

behaviour; if such had been the case your noble thought about me would, I am sure, have done more good in recalling me to a sense of what is right than abuse and reproaches; but, indeed, I trust I am not unworthy of your interest. May I ask you to thank Mr. Norton for his kindness to me, and with my respectful duty wish him good-bye? I do not know in what words to thank you, dear lady."

She took Laura's hands between her own and kissed them, whilst Laura murmured —

"Poor child! good-bye, and take good care of yourself; I shall very often think of you!"

And so these two parted to meet again under very different circumstances, and under a very different relationship.

V.

GONE.

The days glided swiftly by, and in a few more Laura and her uncle were to start for Scotland, and the Nortons to join them there later on.

Laura had been out one fine afternoon to pay some visits, and, tempted by the beauty of the day, had taken a long drive with her dog on the Notting Hill side of the Park, and round by the Serpentine, avoiding the crowd, and she was back somewhat later than usual. As the carriage drove up to the door, she was rather surprised to find it open, and the butler on the threshold as if looking out for someone; however, he said nothing, and she entered the hall. She had scarcely advanced a few steps when she found Jack confronting her with a white and scared expression on his face.

"Jack!" exclaimed Laura, "is anything wrong? What has happened?" Then, as he was still silent, she added, looking imploringly into his face: "I hope nothing has happened to your mother," and when he shook his head a great fear took possession of her and suddenly stopped the beating of her heart.

"Jack! Uncle is ill! I know it now! For God's sake speak—tell me; do not keep me in this cruel suspense, it is too cruel of you. I am prepared to hear."

"Laura! my poor, dear Laura, be brave and I will tell you."

Jack was close to her now, and the servants, who had remained dumb and terrified in the hall, left it, and they were alone.

Laura fancied she heard the pitying accents of several voices on the stairs.

Jack wound his arms round his cousin, holding her tight against his broad chest as if to help her stand the coming blow, and then, in a voice rendered tender by pity, he almost whispered—

"Call up all your courage, dear cousin, a great misfortune has come upon us all: poor, dear uncle is dangerously ill, in fact"—

"Dead!" cried Laura in a voice so agonizing

that it froze Jack's young blood in his veins. "For pity's sake do not say that he is gone! say he may be dying, but, oh! not dead, that I may once more hear his voice. Oh, Jack! don't stand holding me here, but take me to him; come."

"Laura, it is too late, dear; he is far beyond the reach of human voices: gone where we must all follow one day. He came in, apparently quite well, this afternoon; thank God I happened to be here and by his side, when he suddenly cried out, 'Oh, Jack, such a pain in my head, send for the doctor, I am dying,' and I caught him in my arms as he staggered and fell. When the doctor came he said that he was quite dead—death had been instantaneous—it was heart disease. Your name was the last word he spoke in this world, for he murmured, as he was falling, 'Laura;' but, darling, if you had only been in the very next room you could not have reached him in time. He was gone like a flash."

Jack looked down into Laura's face hoping to see the tears coming to her relief, but her large eyes were dilated, and staring like those of a wild animal, her lips tightly compressed, and her face as death-like as the poor corpse's lying in the room above.

"Laura, my darling cousin, speak to me."

But she only struggled to release herself, and raised her hand to her throat as if gasping for breath.

Then her maid came to her assistance, and between them they carried her into her room in a dead faint, and laid her on the sofa, and took off her cloak and bonnet, and loosened her dress, and Jack chafed her little hands between his broad palms, whilst Riddles bathed her forehead with Eau de Cologne.

By this time Mrs. Norton had arrived, all tears, sobs, and hysterics. She was told that she could not be allowed near Laura until she had in some measure learnt to control the violent expression of her grief, so she successfully managed to roll several fits of hysterics into one and gulp it down, and then entered the room where her niece still lay insensible.

By degrees, however, Laura regained consciousness, and with it came back the ghastly reality. Fastening up her dress, and gathering the lace across the bared ivory of her throat, she turned to Jack, and, clasping his hand tightly between her own, she said in a low, quiet whisper—

"Dear Jack, I am well now; I want to go to

him; let no one disturb me. I shall be better after I have been with him, more able to realise that I am henceforth to live on without him, that he has gone and left me. Oh! my dear, dear love, never to see your face again in this world."

The tears coursed each other fast enough now down her cheeks, and after silently pressing her aunt's hand she left the room with Jack, and was taken to the door of that other one where lay that heart, but a few hours ago beating with love and hope, and now still for ever.

Laura entered the room alone and locked the door from the inside, and for two long hours she remained by the side of the dead body of the one she had loved so dearly.

At the end of this time, and after taking a last look, and bidding an eternal adieu to the poor, cold face against which she had so often loved to nestle her own blooming cheeks since the earliest days of her childhood, and which could now no longer respond to her caress, and with a prayer on her lips that God might rest his soul, she left the room, and going up into her own bedroom, was no more seen that night.

Mrs. Norton indulged in wild fits of sobbing and hysterics, thereby getting rid of her grief by

bestowing the full benefit of it on others; and in time she arrived apparently to a state of mind comfortable and satisfactory, so to speak, judging by the keen appetite which she displayed at meal times, doing more than full justice to every dish.

But Laura's nature was not one to seek or find relief in demonstrativeness; her feelings were too deep seated for that; she recoiled from baring her soul's agony to public gaze, and instinctively drew a veil over it and buried it "deep and out of sight" from all eyes but her own.

At times, when at the sudden recollection of a certain word of love from her uncle, an outburst of passionate weeping would break out, notwithstanding all her efforts to keep it down, reminding her of his loss and her utter loneliness, she would leave the room and shut herself up in her own bedroom for hours, and when she came down again no traces remained of her despair but the intensified paleness of her face and the mournful look in her great violet eyes.

Her uncle had been the one great love of her life; she had never known any other, and the wealth of her passionate nature, which under other circumstances might have been given to a

father, mother, brothers, or sisters, was centred on him who represented all these to her.

If her nature had been one capable of being what is called "spoiled," it would certainly have been damaged by such petting and idolatry as he gave her; but fine natures are rendered more humble than imperious by the knowledge of their power, and it is only small minds which take advantage and delight in playing with a heart they know to be their own to do as they please with. Laura could honestly look back on the past and say she had never willingly caused one pang to that heart which now lay cold and still for ever.

Laura kept within the closely shut-up house until the funeral was over, everything reminding her sadly of him who was gone; she shrank from all expressions of sympathy from others, and when Mrs. Norton would touch on the subject of their loss in a hard, business sort of a tone, her niece would interrupt her, saying—

"Dear aunt, please don't speak about him yet to me; in time I shall learn to live without him and even talk about him, and shall love to; but just at present I cannot hear his name mentioned in an ordinary manner. I can only think of him always."

Jack's rough affection was more welcome to her; she was growing very fond of her cousin; his love for her made him tender and thoughtful in a thousand ways, which touched her heart and won her regard and gratitude. He had tact to know when to be silent, and to leave her to her own sad musings, in the indulgence of which she took a sort of mournful pleasure.

At last the mortal remains of George Tait were taken from the house which had been his home for so many years, and laid in that final one from which there is no rising again on earth, and where there is no distinction of persons to the worm, who feeds alike on all. The caparisoned and plumed steeds and string of carriages departed, leaving their late burthen there alone in "God's Acre." And the world went on as usual under the hot August sun, and the next morning the blinds in the house in Russell Square were drawn up, letting in hot breezes, and the servants went about their business in the old way, no longer creeping noiselessly through the house as if fearful of disturbing the slumber of the dead.

The will had been read after the funeral was over, but when Mrs. Norton had wished to speak

about it to Laura she had imperatively silenced her, and had afterwards said to Jack—

"Dear, I don't wish the subject of whatever will my darling chose to make to be discussed before me; but if you see me doing anything which you know to be contrary to his wishes, or which I am not justified in doing, with regard to expenses, &c., just tell me, Jack, and I shall be obliged to you."

"I don't think that likely, dear. Some time hence, when you are better able to listen to business, I will tell you the details; in the meantime, you are sole mistress of spending £8,000 a year."

"Jack, it is a great responsibility to have the management of so much money! I trust I shall not misuse it. I feel very weak, and incapable of exertion of any kind yet, but we must try and do some good with it, Jack."

"No one more fit than my Laura to be the possessor of money. Dear, you have not one thought of self, and I am sure others will benefit by your fortune more than you will yourself. But what are you going to do? You must not stay any longer in this stifling hot place, but get into the country air and pick up some roses in those pale cheeks of yours, or you will get ill."

"Jack, there is 'Glenade,' the moor dear uncle took in Scotland. I will send the servants up there in a few days, and the horses, and we will all follow. I suppose your mother will come with me?"

"Certainly; I can't see why she should object. I am going this afternoon about a cob for you to ride; you have never ridden much, and will want something very quiet and easy going, and I will see about all that for you."

Laura, with a sad smile, thought Jack was about the last person she would have chosen to buy a horse for her, but she was not fit to discuss the subject, and also did not wish to appear ungrateful to him, so she merely said —

"Thank you, dear, and see that it goes up with the other horses."

Laura was deluged with letters of sympathy from people whose relation she found herself to be, but whose names she had never before even heard. The news of her uncle's death, and the wealth which had become hers, added to rumours of her great beauty, had spread through the ranks of the "upper ten," who claimed her as their own through her late father, who, when alive, they would have scarcely owned.

VI.

GLENADE.

"Look at your fine relations, Laura! How very civil they all are to you now that they know you to be a rich heiress!" said Mrs. Norton, as they whirled through the country at the express speed of the Scotch mail. "Precious little notice they all took of you before! They did not even own you! And I suppose you will now fly to their arms, and forget all those old friends who stuck by you when you were a penniless orphan!"

"I was always my dear uncle's adopted daughter, and therefore I could never have been looked upon by them, or anyone else, as a homeless beggar, or, perhaps, they would have come forward before with their help. I should be loath to judge human nature, particularly my own

father's relations, from such a low point of view, aunt; and I think it kind of them, now that they know I am alone in the world, to come forward and show me some interest and sympathy, and I am happy to take the hand of friendship they extend to me, without judging the motive which prompts it as a mean one, and I shall be very sorry and disappointed if time proves to me that it were so."

"You talk about being 'alone in the world.' Have you not your aunt and cousin, whom you have known ever since you can remember anything at all?"

"Certainly, aunt, and I should, indeed, be ungrateful if I were to put your love and Jack's aside in order to form new ties of friendship; but that is not necessary. I never forget old friends, and Jack is dear to me as any brother could ever have been."

"Yes, but Jack is *not* your brother, Laura, you will please to remember."

"There, don't bother her, mater; I am brother, or cousin, or anything which she may like best, and I should be sorry were I anything she could not look upon with affection—then I would rather be her dog!"

"What rubbish you do talk, Jack! By-the-bye, there's that dear, blessed dog of mine being smothered in its basket! Do open the lid a bit, and let it breathe, but don't let it out, or it will fly at Laura's spaniel. She hates her fine airs and graces! Zoe! Zoe!"

The moor was situated in one of the most picturesque spots in Perthshire; the house large and comfortable, with bedrooms enough in it to accommodate half a regiment, and a very fair shooting.

Laura soon picked up her usual good health in that divine Scotch air, of which there is no equal, and although her eyes were often clouded over with sadness at the remembrance of her dear uncle, thinking how he would have enjoyed it, and how he would have loved to take long walks with her through those wooded glens, by trickling waterfalls, and over the purple-heathered moors, still, the natural love of life within her braced her spirits to intense enjoyment, and brought back a faint glow to her cheeks and a smile to her lips.

Jack was devoted to her with the faithfulness of a dog that watches his mistress's countenance, and studies her wishes, and loves to execute them.

Mrs. Norton watched with satisfaction the growing affection of the two cousins for each other, and in her own mind decided the time would not be distant when a nearer relationship would unite them. In order to promote this she came to the conclusion that it would be better they should be alone during their stay in the country, and no foreign element, in the shape of visitors, come betwixt them; but after a month's quiet and seclusion her mundane spirits rebelled at the monotony, and she began to think how pleasant it would be to have a house full of men and fashionably-dressed women, whom she would have to entertain, as Laura kept herself still very quiet. So one afternoon she broached the subject.

"Laura, don't you think we might ask some people down for September? It seems selfish to keep this great house empty, and the game running wild, when we could be giving pleasure to so many people, who would only be too delighted to come if they were asked. Country pursuits are not like London gaieties, and I really don't see how they could in any way wound your feelings."

"Yes, aunt, of course, ask whom you like; I suppose you find it rather dull, and as long as

you leave me free to join the others or not, as I feel inclined, I should only be too delighted that you should do as it pleases you. Who will you ask?"

"Well, I think after the Duchess of Rosemount's particular attention to you, calling, &c., and writing you such very kind letters, she should be invited."

Laura could not help smiling, remembering what her aunt had said about her "fine relations," that she herself should be the first to suggest making advances towards acquaintanceship.

"Very well, aunt, you must write for me, and you must, of course, ask her husband also. And, aunt, I shall also ask Mr. de Vere; he was very kind to me in Paris, and I should like to see him again."

Mrs. Norton rather winced at the idea of this handsome, fascinating young cavalier becoming again her niece's companion; she fancied she smelt danger from afar. But Laura's wishes were tantamount to a command; she had found from experience that discussing them was so much time thrown away—at least, *she* had always found it so. So she gave in, and a dozen invitations were sent out by the next post, and

almost as many acceptances came back in due course of time.

The Duchess of Rosemount was delighted to accept dear Miss Stacey's very kind invitation, the Duke was away, but would she mind her son, Lord Langford, accompanying his mother instead? To which, of course, Laura replied she would be very happy to see the Duchess and her son.

Then a note came from Hubert de Vere.

"DEAR MISS STACEY,

"It is such ages since we met, that I dare no longer call you by the sweet, familiar name of 'Laura!'

"I hope, dear child, you are recovering from your sad loss, although I know how tenacious and true you are in your affections when they once take root; so I fancy you are still very mournful. Well, I find life is too short to take anything very deeply to heart; if one does, one is sure to go to the wall, and then the merry throng goes dancing by; so *vogue la galère!* I need not tell you how more than charmed I shall be to find myself near you once more, and thank you most sincerely for your kind thought of me and invitation.

"I will present myself (you won't mind my

bringing my dogs, will you?) on the 7th. We will have many a long chat. Do you remember our jolly drives in Paris, and those lovely dinners in the Bois, and then the drives back under the stars? No stars have ever shone for me since with such brilliancy. I think it must have been because those were reflected in your eyes! I fancy I can see you now looking up at them, and I watching your face under their light! Well, *you* will always be my own particular star, and no possible heaven for me without you, although I shall never be anything more to you than its poor worshipper from afar!

"Forgive me for presuming to say all this, and do not be angry with me, please. For, believe me, after all, I would rather possess your friendship, than the love of any other woman in the world; so don't think I am ungrateful for that which you have told me shall always be mine, and which I trust I may never prove unworthy of.

"But I am running on and boring you with my stupid jabber.

"Good-bye, or rather *au revoir et à bientôt*, dear Laura. Your devoted friend,

"HUBERT DE VERE.

"Weldon Abbey, Oxon, September 2nd."

Glenade was soon very nearly full; the house alive with visitors, and their suites of servants. The long passages and old staircases creaked again under the footsteps of gentlemen's gentlemen, and pretty, smart lady's-maids hurrying to execute their masters' and mistress's commands. Her Grace, the Duchess of Rosemount arrived with her son late one afternoon. Sir George and Lady Fulton had come by an earlier train. Mr. de Vere was not expected until the next day. Laura did not appear in the drawing-room until close upon the dinner hour, she had been lying down in her room all day, with a bad headache.

Lord Langford was standing with his back to the fire as she entered. He was a tall, distinguished-looking man of about five-and-thirty, with reddish-brown hair, and a heavy moustache, and clear blue eyes, accustomed to take in a woman's good points at a glance. He was said to be most successful with women, and was popular with men. He made a point of never giving up a conquest he had set his heart on, until he had run his game to earth; but, when the fair one became his slave, it bored him, and he took no further interest in her, and she was finally dropped and as soon forgotten. He had no very high

opinion of women in general, and ladies in particular. He was a hard liver, a hard rider to hounds, and a hard drinker too, although in the latter respect he had never been known to take more than he could "carry."

As Laura came into the room, he thought he had never seen a more beautiful woman. Her dark chestnut hair swept across her brow in short, crisp waves as you see in Clytea's bust, which she resembled, and was twisted into thick, loose coils about her well-shaped head, and crowned it as with a glory. The crimson arch of her lips, just parted with a smile of welcome to her visitors, displayed to view a matchless set of teeth, which glittered and sparkled like a double row of pearls freshly washed by sea spray—

> A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
> And most divinely fair.

Her close-fitting black dress, ablaze with shimmering jet, set off to advantage the creamy clearness of her skin, and suggested the moulding of a faultless form beneath.

"By Jove!" thought Lord Langford, "this is a woman if you like; every inch a queen; and the Queen of Love!"

And from that moment he settled in his own

mind that a duchess's coronet would alone become such a brow, and then and there singled her out to become his own.

Jack took in the Duchess to dinner, and Laura brought up the rear on the arm of Lord Langford.

As he felt the warm contact of her arm resting on his own, the hot blood coursed wildly through his veins, and he concluded that at last he had met with a woman capable of inspiring a *grande passion.* He had several times in his life before tried to work himself up to the idea that he had met with his ideal; but the dream he had conjured up had soon been dispelled. This time, however, no effort was required to stimulate his imagination. The sensation was one that took possession of him and mastered him whether he would or no, and needed no encouragement. He sat on her right hand, and he could not help his gaze being continually fixed upon her, even when they were not engaged in conversation. He thought as he dived into the depths of those long, almond-shaped eyes, how much would he not give to be the one to kindle into passion the love light, still sleeping under their heavy lids, and set them ablaze with undefined longings, and close them under his kisses.

Laura felt somewhat uneasy under the bold glances of this finished *roué*, although she was perhaps also unconsciously flattered by his undisguised admiration. She unwillingly admitted to herself that she was strangely fascinated and attracted towards this man, more than she could find any justification for in her own mind. There was a certain assumption of mastership about him, displaying a strong will and unfaltering decision of character and purpose, that forced her own nature to acknowledge that, in imperiousness at least, she had met her equal, and so far called forth her interest and won her admiration.

VII.

THE WILL.

THE next morning gave the promise of a golden day, the dew sparkling and tipping each tiny twig and spray with a glittering coronet of diamonds, and a fine mist gradually clearing away before the glory of the rising sun, like a woman's veil raised to smile a welcome to her lord, and baring her fair face to his kiss.

Lord Langford, Sir George, and Jack, with the gamekeeper, beaters and dogs, started immediately after early breakfast, bent upon slaughter.

Six other men were coming down by the late afternoon train, the same one as that by which Mr. de Vere was expected.

Lord Langford implored Laura (who was always down to breakfast), to drive over and join them all

at luncheon, on a moor three miles distant; but she declined, as she said she was going to drive her ponies to the station in the afternoon to meet Mr. de Vere. His Lordship bit his moustache savagely in the anger of disappointment, but Lady Fulton looked up consolingly with her melting glance, and said she would try and be as agreeable as she could to make up for Miss Stacey's absence —if that were possible! He shrugged his shoulders (he was apt to be not over polite to ladies sometimes), and begged her not to trouble herself to come unless she felt inclined.

With a reproachful look she observed that she should "like the drive very much," and when one o'clock arrived stepped out of the barouche with Mrs. Norton, dressed in the most ravishing cotton costume, trimmed with lace, which *would* keep catching in the briars, and getting torn, obliging her to stoop and just raise it sufficiently to angrily tear off the streaming remnant, and at the same time liberally display a very pretty foot and ankle, cased in a silk open-worked stocking, fringed by the flowing Valenciennes of a richly-trimmed under-skirt.

Lord Langford was accustomed to all these feminine wiles, and yet they had the same

effect on him as a red flag to a bull, and always called up the grosser part of his nature, and set his blood leaping for the moment; although he, all the while, felt an utter contempt for himself and the woman who was the cause of it.

But, *il faut passer le temps!* and, after a four hours' tramp over stubbly fields, it is pleasant to be smiled upon, and waited upon too, by a young and pretty woman, who makes it her business to please, and perseveringly and good-temperedly puts up with short answers, and who, in the end, generally succeeds in bringing out the sunny side of a man's temperament by charming his senses, particularly when he is enjoying a good luncheon, plentifully *arosé* with Moet and Chandon's best brand.

So Lord Langford complacently leant back against the gnarled root of an old tree, under which they had lunched, and presenting his silver case of cigarettes to his companion, who immediately took one, he lighted it for her, and smoked another himself, and then gave himself up to the enjoyment of the hour. The rest of the party had taken a ramble, and these two were left to indulge in the fashionable art of flirtation, in which, it must be said, they both excelled. When Lady

Fulton drove back with Mrs. Norton in the afternoon, she had forgotten to return one of Lord Langford's thick gold gipsy rings, with a single diamond in it, which she had toyed with as they were laughing and chatting together, and which he had slipped on to her first finger.

Meanwhile Laura, after her solitary lunch in the great oak dining-room, had got into her phaeton and started, at three in the afternoon, to meet the train by which Hubert de Vere was to arrive.

As she drove along, a good six miles to the station, through roads winding by clear streams, then diving through thickly wooded plantations, and out again on flat moorland, with its purple sky-line, her cobs stepping right up to their noses, and yet with such good graces and manners, that a silken rein would have guided them, her spirits rose with an inward glow of happiness, caused by the beauty of the day, the loveliness of the scenery, and the sense of her own individuality, with everything about her to make life so pleasant; and, above all, the knowledge that she was much "loved."

Well! someone has said that "happiness in this life depends upon the amount of love one gets out

of it." No truer words were ever spoken. *Love* is the one and only answer to the enigma of creation; it is the divine essence of life, the spark alight in the darkest soul. That Love can be traced through the dear animal world, fresh from God's hands, where "Sin" has never entered, and which could teach us so many lessons in humility, faith, and devotion.

The fact is indisputable, and ought to put our own humanity to shame, when we are forced to acknowledge that human degradation and depravity can place us far beneath the nature of the cur that is kicked from door to door, through our sin-polluted streets! And yet there is "no rock so hard but in its fissures grows the wild-flower love;" and the divine spark dwelt once in the heart of the vilest wretch that ever crawled the earth; nay, and is there still, if we only knew where and how to reach it, and fan it into life; and by *its* light only can the soul be saved from the dark chaos of sin and self-destruction. For alas! humanity is weak, and errs more through ignorance than inborn wickedness; it allows vice, like a noxious weed, to take root in the mind, and finally choke up and destroy those heaven-born

instincts which, like stars, are implanted in our natures to lead our souls to Heaven; "for the pure in heart" alone can "see God."

Then how can we be astonished at finding, where the moral tone of humanity is so low, that belief in anything higher than degraded nature is impossible for it to realize, the spirit of scepticism and unbelief, should become rampant? It is always easy to scoff, the refuge of vulgar minds. So have nations risen to heights of civilization and human splendour, but where their moral foundations of truth and honour have been wanting their downfall has quickly succeeded to the momentary apotheosis of their glory. They have gone up like a sky-rocket and come down a charred mass of ashes, from the days of Imperial Rome down to our own. For where "women are without virtue, men are without courage," and the divine element in humanity blotted out. A heart without a belief and love in a God is like "a world without a sun," and how can they believe in God, or a God's love, who choose first to destroy His fair image within their own souls, or face the light of "the bright and Morning Star" who close their eyes and grovel in darkness and depravity, preferring to eat, and drink, and *try* to "be merry"

because to-morrow "they die," and with death, to them, is ended what their carnal natures could alone comprehend, "the foot of clay," never having raised their eyes to gaze on "the God-like head, crowned with spiritual fire and touching other worlds."

Laura's nature had within it that lovingness which begets love. Her heart vibrated with tender chords to every tale of woe, and she was ever ready to fly with her assistance to anyone she saw was in suffering, or in need. Where other women would have scornfully swept their silks and brocades aside, lest they should be polluted by the mere coming into contact with a fallen woman who happened to be passing by them, Laura could only see in her an unfortunate sister, and tender pity would fill her eyes with tears at the sad sight.

When she arrived at the station the train had just come in, and the platform was crowded with passengers, servants helping the porters to single out their masters' luggage, and groups of dogs chained and huddled together, stretching their necks and straining their eyes to find out, amidst the crowd, the well-known forms of their owners.

Laura suddenly felt a soft touch on her shoulder,

and turning round saw Hubert de Vere's handsome face and broad shoulders by her side.

"Dear Miss Stacey," said he, clasping both her hands warmly between his own, "how sweetly good of you to have come all this long way to meet me. I have been looking forward all the way down to seeing you again, but I little thought you would be here at the station. My man will see after the dogs and luggage; let us be off."

Colonel Bolton and several other men, whom Laura was already slightly acquainted with, now came up and spoke to her.

The break and dog carts had been sent for them, so, after a few gracious words of welcome, Laura and her friend, Mr. de Vere, got into her phaeton and started for Glenade, where they arrived in time for late tea, after a most charming drive in the gloaming, the shades of evening fast deepening the late brilliancy of the landscape into the purple and crimson tints of sunset, and the evening star was just glittering above the horizon as they stepped out of the carriage. Lady Fulton was presiding over the tea table, and talking to Lord Langford, who, however, immediately and rudely left her side the moment Laura appeared, and helped her divest herself

of her sealskin and furs which she had been glad to wear on the drive homeward.

Colonel Bolton at once occupied the vacated place by Lady Fulton's side, but her Ladyship appeared not to care very much for his attentions, and her eyes followed Lord Langford with an expression in them which meant, "You shall pay for this disloyalty; if it is in my power some day to make you suffer for it, you shall."

After dinner the moonlight was pouring in such a stream of light across the hall, where a group of men were lounging at the open door, smoking their cigars, that a stroll round the shrubbery was proposed by Lady Fulton, and the other ladies agreeing, cloaks and shawls were dispatched for, and the whole party sallied forth. Lord Langford and Hubert were both eager to be Laura's escort, but Jack, coming up to her side, said —

"I want a little chat with you, cousin" (then in a lower key), "take my arm, dear, and come along with me, we will give the others the slip and go round by the glen and join them again presently."

Laura passed her arm through Jack's, and they walked at a rather swift pace until they had got

away from the rest, when they strolled along more leisurely, Jack puffing away at his cigar. At last he said—

"Dear, I never can get a word with you now, with all these confounded men hanging everlastingly about you; and I want very much to have a little talk with you on business."

"Business, Jack! what business?"

"Well, you remember, Laura, after poor dear uncle's death, you wished me, at the time, not to refer to the will he had left, and it did not matter *then;* but now I think it right that you should know the details of it, as they concern you very nearly. Do you recollect that to-morrow is your birthday, and that you will be eighteen?"

"So it is dear; I had not quite forgotten it, but I did not think it was so near."

"Well, all that I told you about uncle's will (because you would not allow me to say anything more at the time) was that you were mistress of spending £8,000 a year, and so you are still until you are one-and-twenty, but after that the fortune is only yours conditionally."

"Conditionally? I do not understand, Jack."

They were now half way up the thickly wooded path which wound along by the waterfall, and

had arrived at an old wooden bench, nestled in a nook under a large overhanging rock, covered with green moss and hanging lichens, and starred with forget-me-nots and waving ferns. Jack led his cousin to the seat, and stood talking beside her, leaning his back against the dripping rock.

"You know, Laura, how very decided poor uncle always was, that a woman ought to marry! I fancy men, who have worked hard all their lives at amassing a fortune, have a sort of idea that a woman alone is not capable of the management or the spending of it, or taking proper care of it; or else, perhaps, he thought a woman is happier married than unmarried; he was very fond of you, Laura, so perhaps that might be it; anyway, unless you are married on your twenty-first birthday, the fortune passes away into other hands, and you are left with only £500 a year to live upon."

"And to whom does all the money go then?"

"To various public institutions."

"Why not to you, Jack?"

"Perhaps the dear old soul thought I have enough as it is, and he was right. As long as I have sufficient to keep a few hunters (which I seldom ride), and a trap in town, and am able to

afford to take a shooting when I want it, and am not obliged to limit my stalls at the theatres, I am quite satisfied."

Laura, with her face raised, and her hands clasped about her knees, was looking out dreamily at the moon just breaking forth into full splendour from behind a bank of drifting clouds.

"A penny for your thoughts, Laura?"

"I was wondering what could have been dear uncle's object in making so strange a will? He evidently wished to force me to marry. I cannot help thinking he has made a mistake. Jack, I am not mercenary, but I have been so long accustomed to the luxuries of life that they have almost become with me a sort of second nature. I think I should be miserable without them; and yet now that marriage is, as it were, forced upon me, I feel more disinclined to it than ever. I absolutely loath the very idea of being forcibly chained to a man whether I will or no. It is not that I dislike men (although I do believe I once did), but I have since met with so much gracious attention and unselfish devotion from them that I have a very great regard and affection for certain men; but then that is quite a different feeling to what one should have towards the one man, to

whom one is bound for ever, to love with a love greater than any words can express; and above all, whose character ought to inspire respect and admiration."

"Do you think you could get up that sort of feeling for Hubert de Vere?"

Laura smiled sadly and said —

"Oh, Jack, certainly not, to my mind Hubert is a child. I admire him, for he is very handsome, and I like him, too, because he is gentle and tender, and capable of generous impulses, but, as a husband, the thing would be too impossible! I should have to look after him, not *he* after me! I dare say he would be fond of me, but constancy is a word unknown in his vocabulary, and he would flirt with every pretty woman who happened to flit across his path—I should end by having the most utter contempt for him."

"I don't know the man good enough for you, Laura, to my mind, and that's the plain truth! But at all events, you now know the state of affairs, and you must think seriously over it."

"I almost wish that I did not, Jack; there is something that makes me inclined to be reckless, as if marriage were going, in a way, to be *forced* upon me, and it all should be a matter of such entire

freedom of choice; one should *give* one's self, and not have a husband thrust at one. Poor dear uncle! Whatever he has done was done with the best intentions, of that I am perfectly certain. He had but one object in view: my happiness. Well, I think, Jack, I shall have to try to be happy on £500 a year, that's all, and I dare say I shall manage it. It is only just at first it feels strange to me, the idea of having to live in lodgings instead of a nice house full of servants, and to go about in omnibuses instead of one's own comfortable carriage. But it is only a matter of habit."

"You could always have my trap you know, dear," said Jack glowingly.

"Poor Jack! do you know you quite spoil your cousin?"

"I only wish you would give me a chance, that's all."

"Well, I think we had better now go back and join the others."

As they issued forth from out the network of trees and shadow on to the lawn, upon which the moonlight lay sleeping like a cloth of silver, Hubert walked up sulkily to Laura's side like a pouting child, and at once monopolized her; whilst

Mrs. Norton, in rather an irritated state of mind, owing to considering herself to have been rather neglected in a general way, came up to Jack and walked him off towards the house.

"What have you been saying to Laura? Have you proposed to her?"

"What nonsense, mother! I should as soon think of proposing to Laura as I should of asking the Empress of India to marry me! What is the use of upsetting her and worrying her with such an idea! I think if Laura were to come to me and say: 'Jack, I will marry you,' I should consider myself the luckiest fellow on earth; but if *I* were to say it to her, she would think me about the most presumptuous ass in creation, and with good reason."

"You are a fool, Jack! I believe she cares for you more than she does for anybody else; at all events, she can't *ask* you to marry her; now my opinion about Laura is, that with all her high-flown notions, she is nothing less than an arrant flirt, without a real bit of heart about her, and as such she would prefer, if she could, to keep her liberty, in order that she might be able to flirt with as many men as she could get to make fools of, without tying herself to one; but mind you,

she will marry, she has no idea of giving up £8,000 a year, she is not quite such a fool as that, and if she marries, and she afterwards finds the yoke irksome, or her husband should wish to be master in his own house, she will just, one day, make a bolt of it with some man who is clever enough to humbug her into making her believe she is 'unappreciated,' and all that sort of nonsense; the money is tied up on her exclusively if she marries."

"Upon my honour, mater, you draw a nice picture of the woman you wish me to choose as a wife. Quite a dream of conjugal bliss."

"I don't think she would bolt from *you*, Jack; you are such an ass, you would give in to her every caprice, there would be no necessity for it."

"Thank you, mother; what a charming pair you make us out to be, but you are entirely mistaken. Laura would have an utter contempt for a man who treated her like a doll, and spoilt her in the way you describe; at the same time, I am perfectly certain she would break her heart rather than disgrace herself or anyone connected with her, by 'bolting,' as you call it."

"Well, you'll see! Laura has got a spice of the devil in her, and nothing from *her* would astonish me. Now, look at that little demon, Bella Fulton,

there she goes with Lord Langford, she is bent on his conquest, but however far she may go she will never do anything which would blackball her from society; what she does is all *sous la rose.*"

"Little beast! I hate her," said Jack. "I can't think how you can bring in Laura's name and hers in the same breath!"

"Well, as I said before, time will show; in the meantime, I would rather trust Bella Fulton not to bring disgrace on me, if I were connected with her, than Laura Stacey."

Jack angrily whistled to one of his dogs that was roaming about the lawn, and strode off by himself to cogitate over things in general.

VIII.

FLIRTATION.

Of all seasons in the year the autumn in England is the pleasantest. The torrid heat of summer tones down into those delicious warm days, tempered by freshening breezes, which brace the spirit to a keen sense of enjoyment. The leaves, just turning from bright green into richer tints of deep brown and crimson, throw a golden haze over woods and fields, and breathe into the soul a blissful sense of peace, calm and rest.

Time went by pleasantly enough at Glenade, the weather was gorgeous, and enabled everyone to be out in the open air as much as they felt inclined. After breakfast the men usually sallied forth to their sport, and the rest of the family joined them at lunch, by some moss-covered ruin

or gurgling stream under the shade of the trees, through which the sun's glinting rays only penetrated sufficiently to make the scene joyous, and the scented breezes fanned hot cheeks caressingly under the sapphire dome of a cloudless sky. It was a life which inclined one to love, that one master Chord ringing throughout the great Harmony of Creation, vibrating in the songs of birds, the hum of insects, and in the very rustling of the leaves as they whispered and embraced; all Nature seemed to take up the refrain and repeat unceasingly Love, Love, Love! and what is there, after all, worth living for in this world that wanting? The "crown of all humanity."

And what did Laura's heart say in answer to that call? Will it awaken from its apparent undisturbed calm and passionless repose, and meet half way that devotion she cannot help but know is at her feet if she will only accept it.

Shall she give up the ideal which her imagination has conjured up and nursed since her first dawn of womanhood, and take life "as it is," and man as *he* is, making the best of both, and closing her eyes to her future lord's faults, see in them but human weaknesses, and descending from the altar of an idol, clasp instead the living reality,

and cling to it through all life, to the bitter end, though it should crumble beneath her embrace and prove but an armful of ashes? Or shall she live on, still worshipping her imaginary king, and commune with him in her hours of solitude, a life apart from other lives? No, she will try what stuff men are really made of. The only man towards whom she had ever felt any sort of attraction was Lord Langford. So she deigned to be gracious to him, and in order to become better acquainted with his character, allowed him to become her constant companion. They took long rides together, he willingly giving up his shooting in order to escort her.

Jack's cob did not, after all, turn out such a bad purchase; for although he had paid for it about three times its value, it was a sure-footed, tractable, good-tempered little animal, and its mistress was thoroughly at home on its back, and grew to be very fond of it.

Lady Fulton finding her fascinations entirely thrown away on Lord Langford, now that Laura chose to smile upon him, became capricious and irritable, and revenged herself on her discarded but still devoted admirer Colonel Bolton, on whom she bestowed fitful scenes of temper and wayward-

ness; he put up good-temperedly with them all, preferring his empress's caprices to her total indifference, and politely wished in his soul that Lord Langford had been anywhere rather than that he should have come and disturbed the even tenor of his love making.

Hubert de Vere fumed, fretted and sulked, and d—d Lord Langford. Then on the strength of his maxim "that life was too short" &c., suddenly pulled himself together, and thought what a fool he was making of himself! As it was clear Laura must marry, and as she would not marry him (which he had known long ago), why she might just as well make a brilliant marriage and become the future Duchess of Rosemount. So he consoled himself by making hot love to a very pretty lady's-maid of Lady Fulton's, who appeared to be pretty well accustomed to promiscuous attentions from gentlemen, and was quite pretty and amusing enough to make the "butterfly's" visit to Glenade pass over without that boredom and *ennui* which generally took possession of him when he became a spectator instead of an actor in the game of love and flirtation.

At last the decisive moment arrived when Lord Langford was bent on knowing his fate.

One evening when he and Laura were riding home together, he went straight to the point in his own particular direct manner, and in the tone of one accustomed to command attention and be listened to.

"Miss Stacey, of course you are so much accustomed to men's attentions and admiration that I cannot flatter myself my devotion to you has caused you any surprise or remark, but with me it is a very different matter. From the first day I beheld you, I admired you, and I still think you, as I considered you then, the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen! Since that day I have been thrown almost constantly in your society, and I now believe you the best and the most charming woman it has ever been my fate to meet, and if you will honour me by becoming my wife, I shall think myself well deserving of the whole world's envy. The happiness of all my future hangs upon your answer."

Laura was too well aware into what her life had lately been drifting to feel any surprise when the crisis came, she was not one to have allowed things to go on thus if she had not already all but made up her mind to abide by the consequences.

She turned her head and fixed her large eyes

straight on those of her companion, as if she would read into their very depths. The thought half flashed across her at the time, that had she been in love with that man, she could not have met his passionate gaze so unflinchingly, her own eyes would surely have dropped beneath his in loving surrender.

"Lord Langford, I feel flattered by the honour you pay me, and I wish, above all, to be honest with you. The position you offer to any woman you ask to be your wife is such a brilliant one, that few, I fancy, could withstand the temptation. My nature is an ambitious one, and I don't wish you to think me better than the rest, and that I am insensible to what you offer me; but you are probably aware of the will my late uncle made, by which I am as it were, forced to marry before I become twenty-one?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Lord Langford, "don't speak in that heartless manner, as if you were discussing a mere matter of business; you make my very blood turn cold. Can you then only look upon me as 'a means to an end,' the instrument of your gratified ambition? Does my heart's love go for nothing?"

"I confess it sounds horrible, does it not? But

I told you that I wish to be honest with you; do not reproach me. You may be certain of one thing, which is, that if I consent to become your wife, I shall never bring any disgrace on your name, your honour will be as dear to me as my own, and I would do all in my power to make your life happy, but I suppose love does not come at command, it must be a matter of time and be won."

"Oh, Laura! then let me try to win yours."

"So be it, Lord Langford, but let us know each other a little longer before we come to the irrevocable decision which is to seal our fates for ever."

"Upon my word, Miss Stacey," said he with a bitter laugh, "if anyone heard you they would come to the conclusion we were talking about drawing up our wills and making arrangements for the funeral instead of being married! Well, I am not good at probation, Laura, but it must be, I suppose, as you wish—when will you give me your final answer?"

"On Christmas Day, and you shall dine with me in the old house in Russell Square, and under my dear uncle's portrait in the long dining-room, I will tell you if I feel myself equal to undertake

the responsibility of matrimony, and worthy to accept the position you offer me."

"Say 'yes' now, darling, and seal it with a kiss," and Lord Langford leaned forward, his moustache sweeping her averted cheek, which crimsoned under the attempted caress.

When they arrived home, and Laura leapt from the saddle, his arm encircling her waist, he took her little hand and raised it to his lips, and half whispered as he bent over it —

"How fond I could be of you if you will only let me, my darling."

"I will tell you that when Christmas Day comes," said Laura smiling. "In the meantime you must not think of me otherwise than as your friend, Laura Stacey."

Lord Longford chafed under the rebuff, his man's vanity was wounded at finding this woman could thus coldly meet and repulse his amorous advances; he was unaccustomed to this sort of thing, he had generally found himself met more than half way in his love experiences. However, from that day forth Lord Langford's attentions were exclusively devoted to Laura, and they were both looked upon and considered by the rest of the party at Glenade as "engaged" to each other.

But Laura avoided all *tête-à-têtes* as much as possible, as they inclined too much to verge on the sentimental, and she felt they had better be postponed until she had made up her mind to become Lady Langford. Lord Langford inwardly chafed and fretted under the imposed restraint, and sometimes when his love was repulsed by Laura, his wounded vanity would endeavour to seek consolation in Lady Fulton's agreeable society and sunny smiles. She had a way with her of treating him as if he were a martyr in love's cause, and entirely unappreciated by the woman he was going to throw himself away upon. She did not say it in so many words, or he would have rebelled and loyally defended his queen, but there was a secret undercurrent in her manner to him which implied all this, and a sort of caress in her words which was intended to make up for coolness in other quarters.

With regard to women, Lord Langford had but little principle; he would have been most particular about his own wife, or the woman he was to marry, but every other was fair game to him, and hang it! if a woman threw herself in his way, why he was not going to be a Joseph!

So when Laura had been more than usually dis-

tant with him, and maddened by the uncontrollable thirst and longing which possessed him to press her to his fast throbbing heart, and quench the fire in his blood with kisses on that fresh, voluptuous mouth, he would abruptly turn away from her and leave her; then it would be sure to happen that Lady Fulton was not very far off and would cross his path, and coming up to him would half whisper some soft words into his ear on tip-toe, balancing herself by the tips of her jewelled fingers lightly poised on his coat sleeves. She was a dangerously fascinating little thing, whose charms it would have been difficult for any man to withstand if they had been displayed for his particular benefit; and Lord Langford had never taken the trouble to withstand anything which was pleasant and thrown in his way, so the knotted veins on his temples gradually relaxed, and were smoothed down under the influence of Bella Fulton's rippling laughter, and at last, fairly won over, he would exclaim, throwing back his head and awakening the very echoes with his reckless laugh—

"Bella, you are a little witch; you can bring me round from my savage moods quicker than anybody else I know! You are as cooling and re-

viving as a lemon squash on a scorching summer's day!"

"Rather a questionable compliment, Lord Langford, considering the sourness of the fruit!"

"It is not sour, but 'piquant,' you little demon, and that is what *you* are! Upon my word, I shall forget that I am 'as good' as an engaged man one of these days, if you *will* come up so close to me and put those lips of yours within range of mine! I never could stand much of that sort of thing without forgetting myself, so I warn you!"

"Bosh!" exclaimed Bella, clapping her little fat hands together under his nose, which made him start, then make a grab to catch them between his own; but she had already flashed out of the room, with a mocking little laugh, and rushed upstairs to put on her riding habit for a ride with Jack, who was doing the dutiful that afternoon.

So Lord Langford was left alone to come to the conclusion that women caused a great deal more trouble and bother than they were worth, and it was a pity the world could not manage to get along without them, or else they should be kept locked up in harems, for the sole delectation of their lords in hours of *ennui*.

IX.

BETRAYED.

Lord Langford was leaving Glenade the next day, after nearly a month's visit, when, in the evening, after dinner, during which he had done somewhat more than full justice to the good wines, as the ladies rose to leave the room, he went up to Laura and said —

"I am not going to sit here with the men; my head is aching; I want some fresh air. Send for your wraps and take a stroll with me, will you, darling? The moon is splendid."

Laura looked into his face, which she remarked was rather flushed, and thought she should prefer to stave off the *tête-à-tête* for a bit, until he became somewhat calmer under the influence of the evening breeze, so she replied —

"Would you mind my joining you in the course of half-an-hour? I have a letter I ought to write this evening; if you will kindly come back for me I shall be ready then."

His Lordship reddened angrily; he was not good at being "put off," and, turning sharply on his heel, crossed the hall, and, taking down his hat, which hung there, strode out into the night.

He had only just gained the gravel drive outside when a silvery voice from the hall called to him.

"My Lord, may I go with you?"

As he stopped and turned round, half hoping it might be Laura relenting, he saw Lady Fulton's graceful figure standing in the doorway, her sheeny white satin dress dusky compared to the whiteness of her own snowy shoulders and arms, gleaming in the moonlight, and her face, like a moss rose, smiling at him from between two enormous solitaire diamonds, which flashed in the lobes of her ears like two stars.

"Very well, Lady Fulton, I will wait for you here. Put on a warm cloak, you will catch your death of cold if you stand there with your bare shoulders."

She was gone in a trice, and soon re-appeared,

swathed up to the chin in a long velvet and fur cloak, the hood over her head; and they both disappeared in the dark shadows of the shrubbery. Meanwhile Laura went into the library, and, after writing her letter, she looked at the clock and found that an hour, instead of half-an-hour, had elapsed since her lover had left her, and she half reproached herself for not having been more gracious to him, and thought she would make up for it by joining him in the grounds. So she ran up into her room, put on her sealskin and wound some black lace about her head and slipped out alone and unnoticed.

The moon was at that moment hiding her brilliancy behind some fleecy clouds. She stood a few seconds and listened to catch the sound of footsteps, but, hearing none, she dived into the shrubbery, thinking that would be the most likely place to find Lord Langford.

She wandered about its labyrinth of paths, but nowhere could she find him; rather tired out at last by walking in her high-heeled evening shoes she ensconced herself on a seat deep buried in an ivy-wreathed bower, and, leaning back, she determined to wait there a bit on the chance of his coming by that way, when, if he came, she would

surprise him by suddenly coming forth, and would chide him for his tardiness in coming for her. So she sat there for some time, dreaming about her future. This man with his good looks and princely presence was by degrees making progress into Laura's affections; she was decidedly proud of her future lord, and she felt there was a wealth of affection and tenderness lurking in his fierce nature which she could in time, if she chose, win over and make all her own. Then she would share his ambition in politics, she would help him do some good in the world, and be the friend of the poor and oppressed. The dream was a pleasing one, and she allowed her imagination to dwell on it, her senses lulled deliciously by the thrill of a nightingale on a neighbouring tree, awakening the stillness with his impassioned song.

Her ear suddenly caught the sound of approaching footsteps, still some distance off; she buried herself deeper into the dark recess of the arbour, thinking she would wait until he was close upon her. The trailing ivy and creepers formed a screen, and she was completely shut out from the view of any passers by.

The footsteps came nearer, but surely they were those of more than one person? They were now

close to the entrance of her retreat. It was Lord Langford, but not alone; his arm was wound about a woman's figure, which seemed to woo his embrace, for her shoulders were almost pillowed on his heart. It was Lady Fulton. Laura was transfixed; and before she realized that her position was not altogether an honourable one, they had passed by her and then came to a standstill a few yards off. Lord Langford bent over his companion, and, suddenly raising her bared arms, which gleamed forth from the loose sleeves of her cloak, she wound them round his neck, and their lips met in one long, passionate kiss.

Laura's head reeled as she clenched her hands together in all the agony of wounded pride and humiliation at what she witnessed.

"Thank God!" she muttered, "that man is not my husband!" and then, "Poor Sir George!"

The two lovers walked slowly away with lagging footsteps, their forms swaying under the intoxicating influence of passion, and their two shadows forming but one as they disappeared round a turning. Laura shivered under the shock her whole nature had sustained as she stood for one moment trying to realize what all this must mean to her; then she rapidly gained the house by another

pathway, and got in by a side entrance. Lady Fulton had gone upstairs, and his Lordship was not to be seen, he had joined the men in the smoking room. So Laura, after wishing the Duchess and her aunt, who were sitting over the fire in the drawing room, "good-night," glided upstairs to her bedroom. There she hastily undressed, and, dismissing her maid, locked her door, and throwing herself on her bed burst into a paroxysm of tears. She was not one to give way readily to expressions of grief, her pride would come to her rescue; and if she had not been alone there, no eye would ever have seen or guessed at the war of conflicting emotions raging in her soul.

Then she questioned herself, if she had really and passionately loved that man, would all this have happened? And her pride rose up and consoled her by whispering "no." She had been cold to him and repulsed him, where she might have been loving and tender, and his man's heart, yearning for love he sought from her, yielded to temptation, so hard for a man to battle against when it comes in the shape of a pretty woman who offers him what the other refused him.

Since the cup was dashed from his lips he had grasped at its shadow.

Laura's generous nature, always ready to take the blame on herself and bear the consequences, understood this, her nature was too lofty to allow the petty feeling of jealousy to find a resting place there; but the flitting vision of a possible love, which she had begun to imagine was gradually warming her heart and asserting the promise of its future empire over it, was dead within her for ever (for there is no resurrection in love), and it was over this poor, bleeding thing that her heart was grieving, and over her poor disappointed self too. Was she then never to love? and when her heart was throwing open its gates to admit the stranger, and in unquestioning faith accept him as a "conquering hero," was the bandage to be so cruelly torn from her eyes and she to behold in him but a thief under a prince's garb come to steal away her best thoughts and highest aspirations, and give her in return but a blighted faith and dishonoured love! The thought was a bitter one, and how she longed for a mother's love, a sister's sympathy, her dear uncle's sheltering affection and strong good sense

to guide her; but she was alone. Her window was wide open, and the cold stars glittered and blinked at her, as if they were Heaven's tears weeping with her; but then there was the glorious moon, the empress of the night, shining above them all with a steadfast light, as if she would say, "Poor wounded soul, look up and believe in greatness and goodness still; when all these troubles and worries shall have passed away I shall still reign on queen of the skies; though storms may rage, and darkness cloud about me, I am still here to shine out again calm, and peaceful, and unchangeable; so let your faith rise above and triumph over all things, and come forth the stronger and purer as gold from the furnace."

Then Lady Fulton's figure rose before her eyes. The woman who was her guest, and should have been her friend, this woman of the world who ought to have generously guarded this young girl's honour, had betrayed it! And again the hot tears coursed each other down Laura's cheeks as she felt how badly she had been used! Then her sweet nature sought an excuse, even for the woman, where another would have found but bitter scorn and hatred.

"Perhaps," thought Laura, "she herself was

one day betrayed, and where she loved more deeply than I did, and it has made her reckless and forgetful of what is right and due to herself and to others. Well! I will not be the one to judge her, she must go her way too, and I am alone, and must bear it all as best I can."

The stars were paling in the rosy tints of dawn, and the birds astir and singing joyously to welcome the first streaks in the eastern sky, which heralded the rising sun, as Laura closed her heavy eyes and found rest in a peaceful sleep.

When she awoke and looked at her watch it was eleven o'clock, and the sun streaming in at her window, and her maid knocking quietly at her door with a cup of tea. She rose and unlocked it.

"Oh, miss," said Riddles, "did you have your window as wide open as that all night? The night dews are too heavy, the window should have been closed half way down. I came at eight o'clock with your tea, but getting no answer I thought you were asleep. You are looking very pale, Miss Laura?"

"Yes, dear old thing, but I am quite well, I was very tired last night."

"His Lordship has been asking for you, Miss Laura, he said if you were not well enough to see

him this morning he would put off his departure until this afternoon."

Laura had her blotting book brought to her and wrote on a small sheet of note paper, which she addressed and sealed —

"DEAR LORD LANGFORD,

"Please do not put off your journey until a later hour. I ask you this as a favour. I will write to you to Grosvenor Square by this afternoon's post and explain my reason.

"Good-bye,

"Yours sincerely,

"LAURA STACEY."

Riddles was despatched with the letter, and when she returned she said —

"I gave the letter to his Lordship, miss; he read it and did not look over pleased, if I may be excused for saying so, and he said, 'Tell your mistress I will do as she wishes.'"

Laura, whilst she was dressing, saw the break drive round to the front entrance, and soon depart again with Lord Langford, his servants, and luggage, and then she felt *that* romance in her life was gone and over, and it left her colder and more determined than ever to forfeit any fortune rather

than perjure herself by swearing to honour and obey, and live her life with a man she could not at least look up to with respect and trust.

When she came downstairs it was lunch time; Lady Fulton, who had also only just put in an appearance, looked pale, and her eyes were heavy as if from having passed a restless night. Laura bowed and said—

"Good morning," but she somehow managed to avoid seeing the hand which was half extended towards her.

Her Ladyship thought to herself—

"Laura has possibly heard of my evening ramble with her lover last evening, who must have kept her waiting and she is jealous, silly little fool, why did she not go with him herself." She secretly chuckled, she was one of those women who take delight in tasting forbidden fruit, and consider it a triumph to take a man away from another woman.

After luncheon Laura went into her room and shut herself in, and wrote to Lord Langford. She hardly knew how to express herself, and she wrote several letters before she was satisfied with what she had said. At last she determined to send this one:—

"DEAR LORD LANGFORD,

"I scarcely know how to express to you what I have to say, the task is one so deeply painful to me, and at the same time so humiliating. However, you will understand when I tell you that I was the unwilling spectator of a certain love passage which passed between you and Lady Fulton last evening in the shrubbery. I had gone there to meet you; as you did not come back for me I thought I would join you. Not finding you about the grounds, I was sitting in the arbour by the pathway leading to the glen. When I heard your approaching footsteps I waited, intending to come forth just as you were passing by and give you a fright, and a scolding at the same time, for neglecting to come for me. When I saw you with Lady Fulton I was too much astonished to move, and you had passed by me before I realised that my position was as distasteful as it was painful to me. I need say no more. That answer which I told you I would give you on Christmas Day I must send you now. After what has passed, you yourself could scarcely wish it to be a different one from this—that all in the shape of love must be at an end between us. I need scarcely add that the reason for it will be alone

known in this world to you and I—as far as I am concerned. Whatever injury you do that woman, I will not be the means of adding to it by ever mentioning her name in connection with your own. Let this be a dead secret between us, and I entreat you to think seriously over the cruelty of doing anything likely to bring ruin on a woman, and cast her adrift on the world's hard judgment, and destroy her whole future and that of her husband, for poor Sir George is a kind man, madly infatuated about his wife, whom he implicitly believes in. Is your love for her great enough to make up for so much mischief? Well, I cannot understand how love can exist under such circumstances, when it can only be obtained by the ruin of two human souls, and the destruction of all self-respect! This is the last time this subject must ever be referred to between us, so forgive me if I have said too much. I hope we may remain friends; it was a mistake our ever contemplating being anything nearer to each other. I dare say I have been somewhat to blame in the matter; if so, forgive me.

"The Fultons are going to Brighton in a few

days, and your mother leaves us to-morrow. We shall dwindle down to quite a small party.

"Believe me always,

"Your sincere friend,

"LAURA STACEY."

A few days afterwards Laura received this reply:—

"DEAR MISS STACEY,

"It would be vain in me to try to defend my conduct, as I equally feel that it would be so to endeavour to excuse it in your eyes, and plead your forgiveness. You have pronounced your decree, and I must abide by it. It has destroyed all my hopes of future happiness. The devil had possession of me that evening, and if you had only come out with me you would have brought me back to my better self. You are the only woman, Laura, that I have loved, or ever shall love in this world. The dream is over! And I know it has been all my own fault, and I must put up with the bitter consequences.

"I shall leave England, and travel for a year or two, and when I come back, if I ever do come back, I trust you will find it more easy to give me

that friendship you so generously offer me, although, in my own estimation, I have forfeited even that.

"Good-bye, and God bless you.

"Your devoted,

"LANGFORD."

X.

SOCIAL QUARRELS AND RELIGIOUS SCRUPLES.

GLENADE returned to comparative quiet after the Duchess of Rosemount, and Lady Fulton, and Mr. de Vere, with their suites of servants, had left; then a new relay of visitors put in an appearance.

Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury came down with his handsome young wife. She had been a schoolfellow of Mrs. Norton's, and the latter had never quite forgiven her for having married a man belonging to one of the oldest families in England, whilst her own charms had but succeeded in fascinating Mr. Norton, of St. Paul's Churchyard.

Mr. Dovecourt had a large fortune to begin with, but it had been increased by the death of

an uncle, Mr. Hanbury, who had left his favourite nephew a beautiful estate in Leicestershire and £16,000 a year, on coming into which Mr. Dovecourt had to take his uncle's name.

A queer customer was this Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury. To those who thoroughly understood his eccentricities he was a generous, kind-hearted, loyal gentleman, truthful and honourable in the highest degree, staunch and unswerving in all points of honour; but he would fight and squabble over a sixpence which was due to him. By the same post that he wrote to a tradesman disputing a trifling sum which he had been overcharged, he would send a cheque for £20, anonymously, to some pitiable case he had read about in that morning's paper.

Mrs. Norton was fond of a gamble, although she never allowed her love of gain to go beyond a certain risk on her own side. She played for gain. Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury also loved a gamble, but played to win, not for the sake of the money, but for the glory of success. He was willing to play at stakes however high they might be, and to pay up without a murmur; indeed, he was never in better spirits than when he lost, if he only lost fairly; but then he would

not sit down to be calmly "fleeced," as he called it, by people who thought, because he happened to be a millionaire, he was open game to be "victimized," they were to take every advantage in the game and give him none. His sense of justice rebelled against this unfair division, and consequently the card-playing evenings at Glenade were frequently enlivened by social storms, generally between Mrs. Norton and Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury, and sometimes a young nephew of the late Mr. Norton's, Mr. Harry Norton, a young snob, who succeeded in making himself disagreeable by his forwardness, conceit and ignorance, and was always backed up by his aunt. He was engaged to marry Miss Jones, who was also staying at Glenade.

"Now, Willie," said Mrs. Norton to Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury one evening, "are you ready to play?"

"Yes, Mrs. Norton; but I don't see your money before you."

"I have got three sovereigns to begin with; if I lose them I can write 'I Os.' I suppose they are as good as money?"

"I don't see the fun of that; it ought to be 'R. M. D.' or no play. I am quite willing to

put down my money, but I want to see the other's."

"Go on, Willie; don't be disagreeable."

"I am not disagreeable; but if we are to play for money, why then let's play for money, that's all."

"Lord! what a troublesome man you are, to be sure! Anybody would think you had but £300 a-year to live upon."

"If I had but £300 a year I should not gamble. Well, where's your money, or I don't play?"

"Well, here are three five pound notes in my pocket-book; will that satisfy you? Or do you wish to look at them, and see that they are genuine?"

"I will trust you, Mrs. Norton. By-the-bye, just please to give me the half-crown I lent you last evening. Thank you" (pocketing it with a chuckle), "now we are all right, let's begin."

The game would go on peacefully enough for about three quarters of an hour, when a fresh outburst would take place.

"I tell you, Mrs. Norton, you must be looed. I was looed just five minutes ago for the very same thing. You yourself said it was to be the

rule, and you must abide by it. You are only looed for £3, and I was looed for £25, and looed again on that."

"I never looked at the cards, I merely turned them over without thinking."

"More goose you then for not looking! You might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and looed you are!"

"I will not be looed, Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury, I tell you."

"Very well, Mrs. Norton, then I refuse to play any longer."

Mrs. Norton throws down her cards with a loud noise on the top of the scattered pack, and rises from the table.

"This is most unjust to the rest of the table," exclaimed Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury, as everyone turned over and looked at their cards from curiosity to see what they would have had to play with. "There is little Miss Jones, who has been losing all the evening, held two aces, one of them trumps. I call this simple robbery!"

"I had nothing of a hand," said Mrs. Norton, "and should have lost, and been looed again. I am glad it is stopped."

"Yes, I dare say you are," said Mr. Dovecourt-

Hanbury, tearing up, out of sight, under the table, an I O U of Miss Jones's which he held for £5 10s. "Now then, Mrs. Norton, here is your I O U for £2 10s., which you gave me because you did not think it was lucky to change a fiver."

"Oh, Law! what a screw you are! Fancy bothering me for that beggarly £2 10s. now!"

"Short accounts make long friends, you know, my dear madam."

"You must have a precious lot of old friends then," said Mrs. Norton, "for you never allow their accounts to be anything but short ones."

"By-the-bye, Mr. Hanbury," said Miss Jones, "that reminds me, where is my I O U? I gave you one, I am sure, for some pounds."

"Did you, Miss Jones? I think you must be mistaken, for I have no I O U of yours."

"I am positive you must have it."

"Well, look and see for yourself."

No I O U of Miss Jones's being forthcoming, her little heart gave a leap of satisfaction at the thought that her small next quarter's pocket money would not be so much the less.

And thus it was that Mr. Dovecourt-Hanbury's grand and generous nature was totally misunder-

stood by small minds, who, jealous of his position and brilliant fortune, called him a "screw."

But the days were fast shortening, and the weather, which hitherto had been warm and bright, turned suddenly cold, dark, and stormy as November approached.

Laura was longing for the comforts of her London house, and her heart, restless and unsatisfied, wanted the bustle and continual dissipations and distractions which a town alone affords. There is no such a thing as solitude to the heart that loves, and is beloved; for it is never alone. To those who have Love's eternal sunshine in their souls, nature is always, and under every aspect, a sympathising companion; be she bathed in light, and wreathed in smiles, or dark and overcast, wild and stormy, she never jars on the senses, or awakens discord or mistrust; those feelings are bred, not by nature, but by contact with the world and humanity, not suggested by communion with the grand solitudes of the "God made country." But to the heart that is unsatisfied, thirsting for that love which is one of our noblest instincts, the solitude of nature only makes its throbbings more distinctly heard, and the blank more unbearable still; for

such there is more comfort in the noise and bustle of town life, intellectual pursuits, the clamour of business, the contact with human existence, and human struggles, and human woes, the contemplation of which forces us for a time to forget our own sorrows and our own selves.

Laura, who had begun to almost look forward with interest to her future, thinking she had at length met with another life into which to merge her own, all at once found the cup she was thirsting for dashed from her lips; containing poison, instead of the nectar divine she fondly imagined was going to stir new life within her; and she was again alone! always to be alone! The wild glens and purple-heathered moors had lost their charm to her; she felt she must fill her loneliness and occupy her time with something more than the indulgence of dreams which were never to become realities. A husband's love, the caresses of children, were never to crown her lot in life. She envied little Miss Jones, who was going to be married to that little snob Harry Norton. Was not his snobbism redeemed by his love for that girl; for after all he was marrying her for love alone, he was well off and she had nothing; they would live in some neat little suburban villa,

she would have her brougham to drive about in, and each day's sunset would bring her lover back to her side, and they would talk together in the evenings over subjects of mutual interest, and the darkness of night would come, but to find them more closely united still in a lover's embrace; he would bring his vulgar City friends home from Saturday to Monday, and because they were *his* friends she would never perceive their vulgarity, and smile pleasantly on them in the freshness of her youth and beauty. Poor Laura drew the picture in her mind's eye until she almost envied the little unpretending girl, who was her guest, and whose happiness threw a certain radiance of beauty about her which she would not otherwise have possessed.

Of course she would have many more offers, £8,000 a year was not to be disdained in these mercenary times! Although Laura was perfectly aware of her own beauty, still doubts would in future always arise and poison her mind as to the disinterestedness of men who sought her in marriage; her faith had been shaken, the bloom of her illusions had been swept away by rough handling. She would not again allow herself to be made such a fool of! Love in the present day

was but a question of pounds, shillings, and pence, and marriage the ceremony that secured it, the Church the place desecrated by a perjured honour in order to possess it; the commercial treaty signed, each goes their own way, the two paths seldom lie beside each other, but diverge in opposite directions to only meet again, sometimes at the family grave, where those who have chosen to be parted in life are made to sleep side by side in death. What a fool she was to dream of an ideal marriage! the giving up of her entire nature to her soul's affinity, to love him, to trust him, to honour him, and to implicitly believe in him; to live his life as she would wish to die his death, and thus love on through the "dream to come." She knew what her nature was capable of, but anything short of this entire devotion it would be impossible for her to give. With her it was all or nothing. And must her life then be a lonely and obscure one? All the luxuries, the value of which she fully appreciated, were to be discarded, and she must drop into a small existence, made up of self-denial or economy; the first were easier than the exercise of the latter; to "screw" was one of those accomplishments the most foreign to her character, she would rather have walked the

distance than pay a cabman just his hard fare and no more. Laura understood well her own nature, and she shivered at the thought of the hard life she would have to drop into, but it was not to be avoided without loss of honour, and she braced herself to face it bravely, and face it in its most gloomy aspect.

The remaining time she was still to be in Scotland was spent in quiet rides and drives with Jack, and planning for herself useful occupations when she returned to town.

"Laura," said Jack one morning, after breakfast, as he was smoking his cigarette and watching his cousin's queenly form moving about the room and gliding in and out of the conservatory, arranging her flowers, "Laura, I have an idea that you are miserable; there seems to me that a light has gone out of your face, which I cannot help fancying was kindled there by the presence of Lord Langford—I cannot help thinking you are in love with him, and you feel the void created by his absence, and are dull in consequence. Am I right? I am not such a fool as not to see that he is madly in love with you, so why should you feel so miserable, dear?"

"Oh, Jack, I am so lonely, I have no one to confide in, to talk to, to ask advice of (that I would care to receive), but you; you are my dear cousin and brother, all in one, and I can trust you and speak to you with open heart. I fancy, Jack, there was a love beginning to dawn in my heart for Lord Langford," said Laura, the crimson blood flooding cheek and temple. "Thank God, the blow which destroyed it came before it had invaded my nature and taken entire possession of me. I confess that I think him handsome, and one of the most thoroughbred men I have ever met—I admire him, and should have been proud to call him my husband: but that, Jack, is never to be now. You must not ask me the reason, for I could not tell it even to you. You must not think badly of him either. The fault has been entirely mine. I expected too much, more than a woman ought to expect in the present day from a man like Lord Langford, whose very position and accomplishments lay him open to temptations on all sides. I suppose it would have been the same with any other man placed in the same position. The old days of chivalry, when a knight's motto was 'Dieu, mon honneur et ma Dame,' are dead

and gone, we only find them in romances and novels, and little of that in novels of the present day. 'Nous avons passé tout cela!'"

"I don't like to hear you speak so bitterly, dear; I should be sorry to think that faith, and constancy, and loyalty are not to be found in our time—life would not be worth living."

"Nor do I think it is, Jack. If I had my choice I should wish that I had never been born, it is all a grand mistake. How I envy those whose thoughts are all fixed on religion, those are alone to be envied, for their hopes, their ideas, their aspirations, belong to another world, and this world is powerless to destroy or dim them, or influence them in any way—they soar above it all, they live a life of their own. Fate may persecute them. Death even is powerless to terrify them, but is welcomed as a friend, with a smile on the lip and joy in the heart."

"Really, Laura, you give me the 'blue devils!' We shall have you becoming a nun and taking the veil."

"Never, Jack, for I do not believe in their faith although I admire and respect it. I cannot *play* at religion, and bow my head and swear I believe in certain doctrines of the Church of Rome, and

the Church of England, which far from believing in, I consider downright blasphemy. That is why I so rarely go to church. I do not go because I consider that every time I attend service there I am, to a certain extent, perjuring myself and am disloyal to the God whom I adore, and whose spirit, as revealed in the Bible to my mind, is totally and diametrically opposed to what is generally represented and preached in our fashionable churches. The religion of the day, Jack, is a perfect farce, and everyone knows it! It is a dead letter—the spirit has left it. Women go to church to show off their clothes, and intoxicate themselves with the music if it is good; men go (when they *do* go, which must be said to their credit, is not often) to look at the women, and the spirit of divine Christianity is as foreign an element, as a rule, in that assembly, and more foreign to it, than in the lowest poverty-stricken haunts of our London slums! It is not because I have no veneration for religion, but because I have so high a one that I refuse to go and listen to the fashionable twaddle of the day!"

"I never looked upon it in that light, Laura, though I must say I don't much care about going to church, but that was, I thought, because *you*

so seldom go. I do like the music when it is good. I saw Lady Fulton one Sunday write a note on the fly leaf of her prayer book, and pass it to Colonel Bolton. I confess I thought it rather bad taste. I do hate that woman, Laura! she looks upon me in the light of a boy, and thinks she can snub me. I am not such a fool as she thinks though! Sir George is a million times too good for such a lump of selfishness as she is!"

Laura said nothing, but she thought so to.

XI.

MRS. NORTON'S SUGGESTION.

EARLY in November, the Glenade party returned to town; the Nortons to their mansion at Queen's Gate, and Laura Stacey to the comfortable house in Russell Square. Since she had left it she felt as if she had lived a lifetime—a chapter in its volume filled with bitter experiences and heart's suffering, and wounded pride. Such experiences chasten and are wholesome discipline to those who require them; it is good that selfishness (humanity's great failing) should be taught by chastisement the pain it so often inflicts on others, but Laura Stacey's noble nature was full of compassion and thoughtfulness of others, and she never gave pain willingly to any living thing. She all but rebelled against the harshness of her destiny, and for one moment felt as if she would

for the future steel herself with impenetrable pride and coldness, and become a thorough "worldling," receiving men's devotion as an agreeable *passe-temps*, and give them a stone in return for their love; their lives might be spoiled as *one* had all but spoiled hers, and with the consciousness of her own beauty, the knowledge also asserted itself that she had power to do this. If she could only close her heart against every spark of feeling and pity, her life would be one the world would envy, for the world judges superficially, and envies the young beauty robed "in purple and fine linen," crowned with peerless graces and surrounded by wealth, who has but to appear, be seen, and conquer; it does not dream of the heart which beneath the cold, dead weight of the blaze of diamonds which clasps it, may be faint and weary; or perceive above the smile of triumph the tears lurking in the depths of those star-like eyes, and ready to brim over.

Men call such a woman a heartless coquette, little thinking that such coldness is too often but a woman's self-defence, taught her by sad experience and the bitter disappointment that follows the shattering of an idol, and the belief in a too high ideal of man's perfection.

Lord Langford had kept his word and gone to America, without their having met again.

Laura astonished her friends and acquaintances by the almost reckless life she began to lead.

In the spring she was presented at Court by the Duchess of Rosemount, and Royalty smiled upon her. All London rang with her beauty; no party was considered a success where she did not appear. But Laura had become wayward and capricious. Unlike the professional beauties of the day, whose faces stare at one from every shop window, and glare upon us in every public resort, from the Row in the morning, to the meetings at Sandown and Hurlingham in the afternoon, until their very beauty palls upon us, as we know them more than by heart. Laura, on the contrary, made herself so scarce and was so difficult to "get at," that she was called "the unattainable;" but she never broke faith, where she had promised to attend a party given by a friend.

When the whole room was awaiting her appearance, her wondrous beauty the theme of every conversation, a silence would fall on her entering it, her small, perfect head rising almost on a level with the men's, and a certain dreamy voluptuousness about her walk which men went mad about

and women envied and made caricatures of themselves in trying to imitate; they endeavoured to copy her dress, which was always costly, but simple and in perfect good taste—forgetting that an indifferent original is better than a bad copy —and in every attempt to vie with her, only succeeded in making themselves ridiculous, for the moment Laura Stacey entered a room other women sank into comparative insignificance.

But she had too much mind and heart to give herself up to gaieties alone; those who saw her armed for conquest, brilliant in costly clothes and jewels worthy of a queen, did not also see her on other days dressed in a simple black dress, but which suited her better than silks and satins became other women, patrician from the tips of her neatly-gloved fingers down to her well-booted small feet, with their Andalusian instep, getting into her brougham laden with presents, and drive away to some of the most poverty-stricken parts of London, or visiting her friends at the hospitals.

One of the complaints which most awakened her interest and sympathy was consumption, for her mother had died of it she had been told; and perhaps, too, there was something attractive to

her in the very beauty of some of the sufferers, who to the last retain the delusive flush of health and beauty on their cheek.

Mrs. Norton—who had been "egging" on her son to propose to Laura, completely failed in persuading him that it would be the best thing in the world for him and Laura if they were to marry—thought she would, as a last resource, try her own powers of eloquence on her niece.

She called late one afternoon in Russell Square, and finding Laura at home and alone, sat down and commenced operations. But it is one thing to form a plan of battle and another to carry it out when in front of the enemy. There was a certain "stand-offishness" about Laura's very graciousness of manner, which made a subject personal and strictly concerning herself alone difficult to broach; so, notwithstanding Mrs. Norton's extra loud voice, put on for the occasion, and various little preliminary coughs and "hums" intended as an introduction, she did not feel quite so much at her ease or so confident of success in the enemy's presence as she did when she had formed her plans of attack that morning ensconced in a comfortable arm-chair in her own boudoir.

"Laura, I am the only near female relation you have in the world, and I feel it my duty to give you advice where I think it is necessary, although you do not consult me about anything. You appear to me to be leading a very reckless life, you must know that it cannot last—I think you might try to look upon me more in the light of a mother, although, I suppose, I am not quite old enough for that; at all events, as an elder sister, and open your heart a little more to me about your love affairs."

"My dear aunt, I have no love affairs."

"Nonsense! Don't tell me! I have got two eyes in my head, and I can see well enough that you are gadding about as you do, not so much for the pleasure of the thing as to drown thought. I suppose Lord Langford jilted you?"

Laura thought in her own mind it amounted to about that, but she replied—

"Lord Langford and I have decided on remaining friends only. We were never engaged, you know, aunt, although I once had an idea that I should marry him."

"Well, I suppose you would not have been such a fool as to refuse him if he had proposed to you?"

"I would rather, aunt, if you please, drop this subject. I do not consider that it concerns anybody but he and I, and we thoroughly understand each other. I shall never marry Lord Langford."

"Do you mean to be an old maid then? Surely you do not intend to forfeit a large fortune because you fancy there is no man living good enough to be your husband?"

"That would not be my reason, aunt; but marriage, to my idea, should be something more than a mere contract. I feel I must love and honour a man I am about to spend my whole life with."

"Love is all rubbish! I consider it indelicate in a woman to be in love with any man until he is her husband! Respect is another thing."

Then, clearing her throat, and wriggling herself about uncomfortably in her chair, with a sudden jerk, and not daring to meet Laura's honest eyes, but looking down at the broad tips of her walking boots—

"Why don't you settle the matter by marrying Jack? He would make you a very first-rate husband."

"Aunt, you are speaking for yourself, and I know in my heart that dear old Jack would be

very angry if he knew what you were saying to me. I dare say you mean it kindly, but it is scarcely fair to Jack. I love him so dearly, and have such faith and trust in his good, honest nature, that anything you can say would not cast a shadow of difference over my sisterly regard for him, otherwise it might almost make me dislike him. Why, *Jack!* whom I have always looked upon as a brother! What a horrible idea! No, indeed, I am too fond of him as a brother to risk losing that love for the shadow of another, which would never be; the very thought of such a thing connected with dear old Jack is desecration to the regard I have for him."

"Well, I don't pretend to understand your high-flown notions, Laura! They are beyond me. You fly so high that you will find you have lost yourself one fine day, and your fortune too! But poverty will soon bring you back to your senses when it is too late!"

"Poverty will never lose me the friends who truly love me, Jack least of all."

"Oh, well, there! I have said my say, and it was all for your interest I said it. Jack is quite well enough off as he is, I am sure! He does not

want your money, but I believe he would marry you if you would have him."

"Dear old Jack, I dare say he would, to save my fortune for me, but he is no more in love with me than I am with him, and I should not allow him to make the sacrifice even if he wished it. I hope he will one day find a dear little wife worthy of him, some little girl all sparkle and sunshine, ready to enjoy the roses of life which he can strew in her pathway, without her possessing the unfortunate gift of perceiving their thorns; not an unsatisfied spirit like mine, always on the search for 'blue roses,' which, it is said, do not exist."

"Well, it is no use talking to you, Laura! When you have grown tired of your pursuit after what you yourself say does not exist, how much will you be the better for it?"

"I shall make no pursuit, aunt; I shall be satisfied with the flowers of every-day life, and make the best of them, but I will only wear next my heart my ideal flower."

"Then it strikes me you will have to wear no flower at all, but be content to look on nosegays worn by others, to look on and envy!"

"I will look on, but I hope I can do that without grudging others happiness which is denied to me."

"You are so obstinate it is quite useless my talking to you. You will find out your mistake when it is too late!"

"I cannot help that! I shall be sorry to lose my present comforts, and above all the power which money gives to carry out one's wishes, particularly in bringing happiness to others. I know I shall feel the loss terribly, but what cannot be cured must be endured."

"You certainly will not be able to do much for others on £500 a year. You will only just be able to live yourself!"

This thought haunted Laura, and more than ever made her regret that her uncle should have made so odd a will, not wishing to deprive her of the fortune (of that she felt sure), but obliging her, as it were, to marry.

Mrs. Norton went back to Queen's Gate, the object of her visit unattained, and it need not be mentioned that Jack was not enlightened on the subject.

XII.

JACK'S PROPOSAL.

LUARA was often accompanied by Jack in her charitable expeditions to the hospitals. One afternoon, as they were together visiting one of the wards of the Hospital for Consumption at Brompton, they were attracted towards the bed of one of the inmates. He was a young man, who did not appear to be more than six-and-twenty; the fatal disease had made sad havoc with his features, which were remarkable for their beauty and refined expression. They both stopped talking to him for some time, and were surprised at finding that his conversation and manners were those of an educated man. He appeared to fully realise the hopelessness of the complaint from which he was suffering, and spoke

in such a sad yet resigned way about the end which he seemed confident was fast approaching, that Laura's eyes filled with tears, and Jack's sympathy was strangely awakened.

"Do you suffer much?" asked Laura, stooping down with compassionate gaze on the broad shoulders which were bent forward and contracted by the fatigue of incessant coughing.

"At times, miss, I feel very weary. The nights are the worst; I long for daylight to come round again, or else for the end to come. Oftenest I wish for death, the wind up of it all."

"Oh, but you must not think so despairingly of yourself," said Jack; "there are many cures of your complaint, and you have youth to help you. How is it you come to be in this hospital instead of at home with your friends?"

"Well, sir, I could not afford to be so well attended at home as I am here, and the little money I have saved I wish to keep for the only relation whom I have in the world, a sister, that she may have it when I am gone."

"That is very good and unselfish of you," said Laura. "Where is your sister?"

"She is miles away, miss; in America."

"Does she know that you are ill?"

"Oh, no, miss; I would not for worlds that she knew of it. She probably could not get back from where she is in time to find me alive, so what would be the use of giving her needless pain and sorrow? She will know it soon enough, poor little thing! She is my only regret in leaving life."

Laura's heart was full. What woman who is a true woman does not feel a pity partaking of the divine at seeing a man suffer? Suffering is always cruel to witness, but it especially calls up a woman's tenderness when she sees a strong man rendered by it as helpless as a little child. He, one of the lords of creation, who could in his health and strength lift her in one of his powerful arms as if she were but a handful of feathers, to whom she clings for support and protection as the ivy winds itself about the broad limbs of the oak, is now rendered powerless by illness to help her or himself; he, who was her master, has now become dependent on her for that care and attention upon which his very life hangs. Prostrated manhood appeals and calls forth the divinest attribute of woman: tenderness and sympathy with suffering.

Jack and Laura both took a wonderful interest

in this young man, who became their *protégé*. They found that his name was William Staunton, that he was a clerk in a house of business in the City, and that his employers thought so well of him that they still continued to pay him his salary, so that he might have the money to procure for himself some comforts in the hospital.

Jack and Laura visited him almost daily, bringing with them every possible luxury in the way of costly wine and strengthening nourishment, which otherwise he must have done without. The disease, a most fluctuating one, at times ceased its persecution, and would leave him a short respite from suffering.

Laura questioned the nurse, who appeared to think her patient might linger on for some months, with great care and the strengthening food which he now received; indeed, there were days when he was even able to walk about in the beautifully laid-out garden of the hospital, and sometimes sit awhile, wrapped in a warm ulster (Jack's present), and bask for a few hours in the sunshine.

Jack one day asked if he might be allowed to take him for a drive, and receiving the permission, called for him in his phaeton, and they drove

quietly along the gleaming Thames as far as Richmond, and although when they got back the poor invalid was too weak to get out of the carriage unassisted, the fresh air did him good, and he slept better that night.

"Laura," said Jack to his cousin one day, "does not Staunton put you in mind of some face you have seen before?"

"How very odd, Jack! I sometimes fancy, whilst I am talking to him, that I have met or seen him somewhere before."

"That is just what I think, Laura; and yet I cannot remember where."

"It is not so much his features as a certain trick of the eyebrows, which now and then contract, and give a sort of pained, and at the same time inquiring, expression to the face, which is to me very attractive. When I am talking to him almost another face at times has appeared to take the place of his; but when I try to seize and retain its hold on my memory until I have given it a name, it is gone again. How very curious it is this should have struck us both."

"Yes, it is very odd that we should feel alike about it; it must be a slight resemblance to

someone we have met and been thrown with. Well, if I were to meet that person again now, whoever he or she may be, I should recognise at once the likeness to our friend Staunton."

"Poor fellow!" said Jack, "we shall miss him when he is gone. I shall never go into that hospital again."

One bright May morning Jack with his cousin were sitting in Kensington Gardens.

"Do you know I had a most extraordinary dream about you last night, Laura? Don't be shocked if I tell it you. I dreamt that you were married to Staunton."

"Oh, Jack, what an idea! Whatever made you dream of such a thing, I wonder? Poor fellow! he is the bridegroom of death!"

"Well, but do you know the thoughts that were suggested to me by that dream? They came crowding upon me like a sort of inspiration, and get rid of them I could not for the life of me! They kept me awake until the morning. I hardly dare tell them to you, because I am afraid you will, perhaps, be angry."

"Go on, Jack."

"Laura, why should you not marry Staunton? There is nothing disgraceful connected with him;

many a woman has married a dying man in order that he might be able to provide for her; that you should marry him would not in any way hasten his death, and your fortune will then be secured to you."

"Oh, Jack, I should feel as if I were committing murder, trading on that man's death; for I should only marry him on the certainty of being freed from him."

"I think that is an unnecessary scruple on your part; I could understand your objection if by marrying him you in any way injured him; but, on the contrary, as long as he is alive he will, of course, be provided with luxuries he could not have himself afforded, and his last moments may be made happy by the assurance that you will look after, and provide for life, for anyone dear to him whom he leaves behind."

Laura's mind grasped the fact that if she consented to what Jack proposed, and Staunton also consented, her future was secured, a large fortune was at her own disposal, and she need only marry again if she met with her ideal lover.

"But," said Laura, "we must not do evil that good may come of it."

"I fail to see any evil that would be done to

anyone by your marrying that poor fellow. You will not be his wife."

"Suppose, Jack, that he should get well, how could I introduce such a man to the world as my husband?"

"Don't you know that of all fatal diseases consumption is the most hopeless? There is no known cure for it."

"Oh! how cruel and hard it sounds, Jack. I am sure I do not wish the poor fellow to die."

"Whether you wish it or not he is doomed, Laura; your wishes can make no difference to that, one way or the other."

"Jack, if it can be done I give you my consent; and if afterwards my fortune should bring me ill-luck, misery, and unhappiness, I will take it and bear it as a just punishment for what I have done."

"Laura, I am pleased to find you so sensible on the subject. I expected all sorts of objections raised. I think you would be doing wisely; and I know when you have once made up your mind you will not be like lots of women: wavering backwards and forwards in carrying it out. You will go pluckily through it. The marriage need not be made public at all, or only when the time

comes for it to be known: on your coming of age. Whoever you marry has to take your name. You retain your own, which simplifies matters."

"How can such a horrible subject be broached to that poor fellow?"

"Leave that all to me; you had better not see him again until I have made all necessary arrangements. Although Staunton's position as a clerk was a humble one, I have ascertained that his father was a gentleman."

Jack was quite elated with the happy thought which had suggested itself to him, and which he felt satisfied, in his own mind, if carried out would be a sure way of securing Laura's happiness. He loved his cousin dearly, and it would have cost him a very bitter pang to have seen her, for the sake of a fortune, married to a man whom she did not care for, and tied to him for a lifetime which might turn out most unhappily; and yet Laura deprived of all those attributes of wealth her beauty graced so charmingly, was also a sad picture to contemplate. Whilst now, having married Staunton, she would be a free woman, to act according to the dictates of her own heart. He felt that the task before him of making the proposal to Staunton, and, as it were, disposing of his

life, short as it was, was not altogether a pleasant one; but he was determined to make it, and decided that no time should be lost. So, hot about his project, he drove over that same afternoon to the hospital.

Poor Staunton had had a bad night, which had left him in a very exhausted state.

As Jack approached the bed on which he lay, pale and prostrate, he saw his wistful gaze looking out, as he fancied, for the companion who generally accompanied him.

"My cousin is not with me to-day, Staunton."

"God bless that lady's beautiful face. I was looking round for it, sir."

"That cousin of mine is an angel, Staunton, if there ever was one on this earth of ours; and she is as good as she is beautiful. I have come to-day to speak to you about her, on a subject of very great importance to her. The proposition is entirely my own, she has had no part in the thought of it. Do you know that it is in your power to do her a very great service?"

"Only fancy that being possible to me, sir! I would gladly sacrifice my life, if I had one, in order to do her a service."

"My poor fellow, it is your very life that I ask of you."

Staunton smiled sadly, and, pushing back the wavy clusters of his auburn hair, said —

"I am all attention, sir, and thank you for this."

Jack rapidly laid before him Laura's position, and told about the will which her uncle had left, her distaste to marrying, and the loss of her fortune if she remained single. Then Jack hesitated, not knowing into what words to put what he had to say, fearing to wound his friend.

"I think I understand it all, sir, and if I am mistaken you must please forgive me and forget what I am about to say. You would wish that she should marry me that she might thus become a married woman and yet a free one? I see that I am right in my conclusions; and now, less than ever, do I rebel against a fate which has doomed me to an early death if it will only delay until I can do this that you wish. I am yours and hers, body and soul; but the ceremony I feel sure must take place soon or I shall not be strong enough to be allowed to go out. I am getting very weak, sir. Tell the young lady, Miss Stacey, that I hope she will

not look upon me with repulsion on account of this. I am scarcely one of you, the hand of Death is already upon me; I belong to the land of spirits rather than to this world of flesh and blood; and the sweet sight of her, now, more than ever, that I know I am able to be of service to her, gladdens my heart and helps to strengthen my spirit to face the last struggle. Ask her to try and not turn from me with disgust when we meet. It will be hard for her to have to stand by my side under such circumstances, even for a few brief moments, but those, like the rest, will soon be over. She need not be afraid of the dying."

"Staunton, you are a brave and generous soul. You have divined at what I had to say to you, and put it in such noble words that you have saved me the humiliation of saying it myself. I need not tell you that your sister shall be provided for, and a fortune secured to her, and that your every wish shall be sacred to us and carried out to the letter."

"Thank you, sir. When do you think I shall be required to go through the ceremony?"

"I will see about that and let you know in good time."

"Thank God, my father's name is without a

stain, and although Miss Stacey will have to hear it pronounced in connection with her own patrician one, it need bring no blush of shame on a lady's cheek."

"I am sure of that, Staunton," said Jack, clasping his thin hand, "and you are yourself every inch a gentleman."

"Thank you, sir, for those words. And now I feel I had better be left alone if you will excuse me for saying so; leave me, sir, and get back into the fresh air and sunshine, and please take my respectful and most devoted expression of thanks to the lady, and tell her my life is hers, and that I am glad its very worthlessness makes it of value to her. I fear a paroxysm is coming on, dear young gentleman, leave me to the nurse. I want to harbour up all my strength now for that one day."

So Jack drove off, his heart full of sadness, and at the same time happy in the thought that his plan was so far successful.

The next morning he set about procuring an especial licence, and made the necessary arrangements that the marriage ceremony should take place in the course of a very few days, at a quiet little church at Clapham.

Jack told Laura how well Staunton had behaved, and also the message he had sent her, and she determined she would not give way to a certain feeling which, under the present circumstances, might have prevented her from again visiting the hospital. So the very next day she went there, and alone.

The invalid's pale cheek flushed at the sight of her in the splendour of her health and beauty. He was better, and was sitting out in the garden. He rose from his seat as she approached, and bowed low over the hand she held out to him. Her own trembled, and, an unusual thing with her, she did not raise her eyes, but avoided meeting those grey eyes of his with their far-away look, which were now fixed upon her in rapt admiration.

"How kind of you, miss, to come to see me again. I did not expect it."

"Mr. Staunton, I cannot express to you how deeply pained I am, and also how full my heart is of gratitude to you that you should have so nobly consented to" —

"Oh, miss," said Staunton interrupting her, "please do not say another word about that; let that subject be discussed by your cousin and myself alone; please forget its very existence, or you

will make me so very, very unhappy about you. Only believe that the knowledge that I can in any way whatever be of any use to you or yours, has made me the happiest man in all the world. I would not exchange places with the first Duke in the land! To die for your sweet sake, lady, who have been an angel of mercy to me, is glorious. I should not wish to live if I could, when, by dying I can serve you better."

"Oh, please do not talk like that, Mr. Staunton, rather let us avoid the subject as you said. I am very glad to see that you are better to-day."

"I feel much better, miss, and I hope I shall not go back again for the next few days. I shall want all my strength for the day when the young gentleman is to call for me; after that I care not how soon the end comes, it will be more than ever welcomed by me."

"I have brought you some books," said Laura, "but I have left them in the carriage, I will go for them."

"Pray do not take the trouble, miss, allow me to go."

"Indeed I shall not allow you to stir," motioning him as he rose to resume his seat, and she went to the carriage, he watching her graceful figure as it

moved away, and wondering if, in the land to which he was hastening, the angels were as beautiful as she.

She returned with an armful of books which she gave to the nurse, who had come to see how her patient was feeling.

Laura used to pay this girl well, indeed she frequently had to force money into her hand which she objected to take, as she was well paid, and would have done her duty without this, but it need not be said that encouragement in the way of munificent presents from Laura did not diminish her zeal, and without neglecting her other patients the young lady's *protégé* was always the first to receive her attentions; besides, he was young and good-looking, which always excites extra sympathy and devotion in a woman, even in a nurse, rendered almost indifferent to suffering by constantly witnessing it.

"Good-bye, Mr. Staunton," said Laura, extending her hand to him, which he retained for one brief second within his own, then released with a sigh.

"Good-bye and God bless you, dear lady."

Laura drove away, a great compassion in her heart, and an admiration for the nature of the

man who had expressed himself so nobly, and was so resigned to his fate.

That night she went to a ball, but whilst the best and most distinguished men in London were paying her compliments and prostrating themselves and worshipping at her shrine, the vision of Staunton's pale face, with its spiritual look, and an expression of adoration on it on speaking to her, as a priest might wear addressing a saint, would float before her eyes, as she thought, had that man been born in such a sphere, how much he would have graced it by his good looks alone.

XIII.

A PRIVATE MARRIAGE.

Jack had procured a special licence, and the day for Laura's marriage arrived. Jack was to call for Staunton in his brougham, and was to give his cousin away; and she was to meet them at the church at Clapham at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Jack had fixed on the ceremony taking place at a small suburban church, as he thought it less likely they should meet anyone there who knew them.

Laura chose to wear as her wedding costume a violet velvet dress, and a long cloak trimmed with sables, she had a bunch of fresh violets in her bonnet; it was one of her extravagances that

she never wore any but natural flowers, and another large bunch of violets was fastened on her shoulder.

The day was fine, the sun shining, and all Nature brilliant and joyous in the bright hues of spring; one of those gala days on which to realize that such things as sickness, misery, and misfortune exist, seems impossible in the laughing face of that blue sky, dimpled over by a thousand tiny golden clouds.

Laura Stacey had determined that when Staunton should have become her husband his days should not be ended at an hospital, and she had herself engaged for him a suite of comfortable rooms in a good situation in Kensington, where the air was fresh and free from the smoke of a more central part of London. She had arranged privately with his nurse that she should accompany him, and she had also engaged other servants to wait upon him, and a brougham for his use. She had herself sent down flowers, Dresden candelabras with wax candles, and dainty rose-coloured shades that the rooms might look comfortable on his arrival, in fact no luxury which money could procure had been omitted. Jack had been told about all this, and that instead of

driving him back to the hospital he was to take the poor invalid to his new abode.

Laura tried to comfort herself with the thought that he would be cheered by the change, and his remaining span of life not made more sorrowful by the sight of others suffering around him. She was thinking over this, all the way, as she drove in her *chic* little brougham, with its high steppers, through the Park, over Battersea Bridge, and finally arrived on Clapham Common, where she got out and left her carriage to wait for her return.

She hurried across the pretty common, with its range of white houses in the distance, and the sound of children's laughter floating on the air as they sailed their tiny boats in the muddy ponds, until she arrived at the little church, where Jack and Staunton were already there expecting her arrival. There was not a soul about, except the clerk and the old pew opener, who was dusting out one of the pews; the clergyman was in the vestry.

The ceremony was at once proceeded with; the sacred words were pronounced, and Laura's fate was sealed. Staunton's voice was loud and clear in the responses; Laura's trembling, and scarcely audible.

As they issued from the ivy-covered porch, Laura, with tear-stained and drooping eyelids, gave her hand to Staunton, and wished him "good-bye."

"I have a favour to ask of you," he said in a faint voice, "the last one. May I have, as a remembrance of this day, that bunch of violets you are wearing?"

Laura detached the violets, which were fastened in her cloak with a small diamond arrow, and transferred them with trembling fingers to the button-hole in his coat, securing them with the band of brilliants; then she suddenly turned away, and walked rapidly back across the common, and regained her carriage.

Staunton stood watching her, although Jack took his arm and tried to hurry him back to their own brougham, which was standing a short distance off. But he neither spoke nor moved until the gathering haze had entirely wrapped itself about that woman's retreating form and shut it out from his sight; then he said—

"I am ready now."

They both got into the carriage, and Jack, after carefully wrapping the travelling rug about the invalid's knees, gave directions to the coachman

where he was to drive to, then seating himself beside Staunton, he explained to him where they were going —

"My dear fellow, we are not going back to the hospital, you know. My cousin has taken charming rooms for you in the neighbourhood of Kensington Gardens, and has seen herself to their comforts."

"Thank you very much, and that dear lady for her kind thought of me; but I would rather, if you please, go back to the hospital."

"Oh! but, indeed, you must not; she would not hear of it, nor will I! You will offend us both very much by not acceding to our wishes on this point."

"I am very sorry, sir—and you know well that I should be only too happy to do anything you both wish—but on this one subject I am fully determined. I will remain at the hospital."

Jack tried every possible argument and persuasion, but entirely failed, as Staunton mildly but resolutely insisted on being taken back to Brompton, and given into the care of his nurse, who was rather disappointed at not accompanying him to new quarters.

Jack drove on to dine with Laura in Russell Square. The next day they were both going to pay a fortnight's visit to the Duchess of Rosemount, in Devonshire.

Laura was bitterly disappointed to find that all the trouble she had taken to secure every possible comfort for Staunton had been thrown away.

"How very unkind of him," said she to Jack as they were sipping their coffee in the dining-room after dinner. "I cannot imagine what his object can be in refusing to leave the hospital. I suppose it is pride! I do not at all like the idea, Jack, of my husband being in an hospital! For my sake, he should have consented to do as I wanted," said she dreamily, turning round the thin gold circle on her fourth finger, half concealed by a magnificent hoop of brilliants. "I feel, in my heart, like a criminal with a deadly secret."

That evening, before going to bed, as she was to start early the next morning, she wrote to Staunton the following letter, enclosing a cheque for five hundred pounds:—

"Dear Friend,

"I am truly grieved to learn from my cousin that you have refused to go to the com-

fortable apartment I have engaged for you at Kensington, and that you insist on remaining at the hospital. You must realize that it is painful and humiliating to me to a degree to know that the man who is my husband should be the inmate of a charitable institution, whilst I am living with every conceivable luxury around me. Is it your wish to make me feel this? and have I, then, already begun to reap the fruits of an unworthy proceeding? What difference does it make to me that the world is ignorant of the fact? *I* know it, and that is sufficient.

"Let me implore of you, for my sake, do not remain one day longer where you are. I ask it of you as a favour. I know full well, as you yourself know, that, according to law, you could come here if you chose; myself, and everything that is mine you have a just right to, and if it pleased you to do it I must submit. Is it this, then, that you want?

"I am going away to-morrow morning, to stay at Tynton Castle, Devon, for a fortnight. Let me have a line from you, telling me how you are, and let it come from your new quarters in Kensington; it will make me much happier in my

mind to know that you are there, and, I trust, better.

"I am,

"Your wife,

"LAURA STACEY.

"P.S.—I enclose a small cheque that may meet with any immediate requirement. You know that for anything you may require or wish for you have but to write and tell me."

All the way down in the train the next day Laura, leaning back on the comfortable cushions of a first-class carriage, with Jack beside her, and the newspapers he had given her laying unopened on her knee, was gazing out on the flying landscape with sad, dreamy eyes. Away they flew past pretty scraps of scenery, picturesque cottages, neat railway stations (a mere flash of bright, clean woodwork and flaunting flowers), through woods, the branches almost sweeping the carriage windows, then out again into the open country, all fading away visions, the blue sky overhead alone appearing to be stationary. In the green fields the little lambs were skipping and gambolling around their mothers' fleecy sides in blissful

ignorance of their approaching fates, and the cruel butcher's knife which awaited them. All Nature was radiant, enjoying the present splendour of the day; but Laura's heart was out of tune with the general jubilee, and was heavy within her.

Her thoughts went back to a solitary figure in a London hospital, who was without a friend save herself and cousin, who were both at this moment hurrying away from him. She tried to persuade herself they would not be missed; then she thought of the money she had sent him, and wondered if she ought to have sent more. Perhaps he would send it to his sister in America, and ask her to come over to him. Why did she not think of suggesting it to him? She would be quite happy in her mind if only his sister were by his side. She would write by the very next day's post and ask him for her address, and herself write, enclosing money, and tell the girl to come over at once. What of that if she arrived too late? She would have done her duty.

They arrived at their destination to find the house full of visitors. Laura had little time to devote to musings there; each day brought its

different occupations and amusements. Laura, as usual, was the centre of attraction; but all the devoted attentions which were showered upon her only made her feel the more lonely and unhappy.

"These men little think," said Laura to herself, "that they are losing their time, and that I am a married woman; or would that make any difference in their attentions to me, I wonder? I dare say not. *Au contraire!* Married women appear to be the rage; men think nothing of unmarried girls, but pass them by as flat and unattractive, unless they happen to have big fortunes, as I have the unenviable reputation of possessing."

Amongst the visitors at the Castle were Sir George and Lady Fulton. Poor Sir George, with his usual hang-dog, unhappy expression, loafing about, not exactly knowing what to do with himself, not appearing to be overcheerful in the society of the men who followed his wife's example, and had a sort of way of passing him over as if he did not exist; neither was he at ease with the women, to whom he did not care to make love, and who, consequently, considered him a bore. His wife was still sowing her wild oats broadcast, getting still more desperate as she

approached that dangerous age to a woman of her stamp—five-and-thirty—when she begins to realize that her beauty is on the wane, her looking-glass but too faithfully reproducing certain little straggling lines about the eyes and mouth, vulgarly termed wrinkles; and she is therefore determined to make the most (according to her own idea of improving the shining hour) of the few fast-flying ones that remain to her. For when they are gone, and the sun for ever set on her conquests, she will be forced, *malgré elle*, to settle down, and be satisfied with the foolish devotion of her own husband.

"Oh, Jack," said Laura one day, as they were riding apart from the rest through one of those lovely lanes, their banks one mass of violets and primroses, which abound in Devonshire, "what a contemptible part that woman, Lady Fulton, makes her husband play. Very few people but what give him credit for being perfectly aware of his wife's intrigues and tolerating them. I know better. He thinks she is giddy and imprudent, and is unhappy about it, especially for her sake, but he would stake his life on her honour."

"I think he would lose it," said Jack. "I

don't believe that he is quite such a fool as you think—none so blind as those who won't see."

"Then it makes it all the more wicked of her," said Laura, "for she trades on the poor man's love for her, and takes advantage of it, knowing he is so fond of her, that he must submit to be the 'thing,' she chooses him to be, or otherwise he must lose her altogether; and I suppose his life would be utterly lost without her, he thinks there never was such a beauteous thing created as she since the world began."

"I think him rather an ass, dear! I should just like to see a wife of mine go on like that," said Jack straightening himself in his stirrups, with great importance. "She or I would have to hook it. I don't believe she would think quite so much of herself if she only knew the way in which men speak of her at their Clubs, and in the smoking-room. Bella Fulton is nicknamed—'La Belle de Nuit.'"

"Why, Jack?"

"I can't tell you why, except that 'la belle de nuit' is the name of a flower that is chaste during the day, but at night, when all other flowers are sleeping, she spreads her petals and puts forth all her attractions, and makes love to the stars and to

the moon (because there is a man in it I suppose!)"

"How silly you are, Jack!—but to pass to another subject, I think it so odd that Staunton has never written to me, or even answered my letters; I should be anxious did I not know by a letter from the nurse that he is much better. That man, Jack, is not going to die, he will recover. I am sure I do not wish him to die, I should hate myself if I allowed such a wicked thought; but what in this case is to become of me, what am I to do? Oh, Jack, I wish I had never consented to your proposal, and that it had never entered your head; I have played a mean part, and the punishment is sure to follow."

"Nonsense, darling, I think it would be a perfect miracle if he were to recover, but in that case we must make a handsome provision for him, and he had better live abroad."

"But suppose he refuses and insists on claiming his rights—and me! He is but a man after all, and what man would consent to resign a wife with such a fortune as mine; a wife, too, who was thrust upon him? He would be more than human, and we must not expect it of him. Oh, Jack! the thought is too horrible!"

"Well, I don't believe Staunton is a man to force himself on a woman, or on to anyone who did not want him."

"I am glad," said Laura, "that our visit is drawing near its close. When we get back you will have to go and find out the whole truth, and we must do for the best. I feel sometimes as if I should like the whole world to hear and know what I have done, and why I have done it, and abide by the consequences."

Their visit to the Duchess came to an end, and Laura, with her cousin, returned to town.

XIV.

HE LOVED AND RODE AWAY.

A FEW days after his return, Jack rode over one morning to the hospital.

He left his horse in charge of the groom, and stepping across the courtyard made his way to the ward, where he expected to find Staunton, but his bed was occupied by a new face (so different from his). On the nurse making her appearance Jack asked her where her patient had been removed to.

"Mr. Staunton, sir, left the hospital three days ago."

"Left the hospital! But where has he gone?"

"He said he was going into lodgings, sir, but he avoided telling me where, and as for the time being he was sufficiently recovered to leave the hospital, we could not, of course, detain him."

"I suppose he has gone to the rooms where I wished him to go before," said Jack. "I will ride back that way."

"I fancy not, sir, although I have no reason for saying so."

"But, nurse, why did you not write to Miss Stacey, and inform her of this, you knew perfectly well what an interest we both took in this young man?"

"Because he particularly requested me not to do so, sir, and said he was going to write to her himself."

Jack called at the apartments in Kensington, but they were still unoccupied, and the landlady had heard no news about the gentleman for whom they were engaged.

"What's up now I wonder!" thought Jack, as he rode on to Russell Square, where he found Laura at luncheon, to whom he told the result of his expedition to Brompton.

"I say, here is a nice go, Laura! I wonder if the man will turn up here this afternoon with his luggage on the top of a cab, and order the fire to be lighted in the best bedroom, and the champagne to be iced for dinner?"

"Oh, Jack, what is to become of me? How

very dreadful! And I thought that man had a noble nature! He is probably like the rest, himself first, and what else matters? I will never live with him, of that I am determined. He can come and take all I possess, and I will disappear from this hateful world, and go and bury myself quietly down in some far distant country spot. I am weary of life and ambition, the sense of both are dead within me, I only long for rest."

"You must not look at things in so black a light. I believe Staunton will be content to accept any terms; he is not the blackguard we are accusing him of being. I will go over this very afternoon to his employers, and see if they have had any news of him."

"I will go with you, Jack, and wait outside in the brougham."

So at three o'clock the carriage came round, and Laura and her cousin drove to the City, and pulled up at one of those mysterious looking courts which hold within their precincts the wealth and prosperity of England.

Jack was not gone long, and when he came back Laura saw at once that the object of his visit had been unsuccessful. He had been told that Staunton had called there two days ago, so

much improved in health and appearance that his old employers had scarcely recognised him. He said he had come to thank them for all their kindness to him, and to wish them "good-bye," as he was not going to continue in their office. They had asked him where he was going, but he had declined to say, merely observing that he had not as yet made up his mind what he was going to do, or where he was going.

"All this but confirms our worst anticipations," said Laura, as they drove home. "We must wait and see what he intends doing. I am prepared to put up with whatever may follow this injudicious and bad action of my life; when the time comes I will do what I think is right."

But days rolled on, and no tidings of Staunton reached either Jack or Laura.

About a week after this, Miss Stacey was one night making her way out of the Opera House to her carriage. It had been a great night at the Opera, honoured by the presence of Royalty. There was a crowd about the entrance, gesticulating footmen, "roughs," and "scouts," eager for a job to fetch a cab, gentlemen in evening dress hurrying along with ladies on their arm to join their carriages which they saw approaching.

The rain was coming down in torrents, and there was a general confusion.

"Miss Stacey's carriage stops the way," was shouted forth as Laura hurried on through the parted hedgerow of faces, eager in the midst of the rush to catch a glimpse of her beauty. She had just reached it, when she suddenly started back, for in that crowd of faces she saw Staunton's eyes fixed upon her.

She dropped Jack's arm, and stood for one second as if rooted to the spot, looking back, heedless of the policeman's angry command to her coachman to "move on" and make room for the other carriages. But the vision was gone, the ghost had faded away, yet those eyes were still burning into Laura's very soul, and when she was seated in the carriage she all but fainted.

"What is the matter, Laura?" said Jack, seating himself by her side. "You are as white as a sheet. Are you not well?"

"Jack, I have just seen Staunton. He was in that crowd, his eyes fixed on me!"

"Nonsense, dear, your nerves are unstrung. How could it be he? Why, it would be as much as his poor life were worth to be out on such a night as this. I should think he would never live

to see to-morrow's sun rise if he has done so imprudent a thing."

"If this suspense lasts much longer, Jack, I really believe I shall fall ill, and have a brain fever."

"I think you and I had better go abroad for a bit, dear. Change of scene will do you good, and you require it."

"Wherever I go I shall be haunted by that pale face I have just seen, with its sad, reproachful eyes. There was no malice in them, Jack!"

Some few days later, as Laura was sitting reading one morning in her room, a sealed letter was handed to her. The handwriting was strange to her. As she opened it, the cheque for five hundred pounds which she had sent Staunton dropped from it. The letter was from him, and as follows:—

"My Dear Lady,

"Forgive my apparent neglect and ingratitude in not having, long ere this, answered your kind letters, and also please to forgive me if I have caused you any anxiety of mind by my silence, and incurred your displeasure by not carrying out your kind wishes with regard to

leaving the hospital when you requested me to do so.

"In truth, I knew not how to write and tell you news which must be unwelcome to you. I fear now to terrify you when I inform you, as I must, that my health is so wonderfully improved I am almost quite my old self again, and yet not that either, for my old self did not know *you*, and I am a better man than I could ever have hoped to be had we never met.

"I was content to die before I had seen you, and when you came, in your sweet, generous-hearted way, to visit me at the hospital, like an angel from Heaven, and one day I learnt from your cousin that by my death it was in my power to confer on you freedom and a fortune, I was still more reconciled to my fate; but to live to behold you again was worthy of a supreme effort, and so, instead of dying, I suppose I lived on.

"I cannot help it, or am I to blame if, with your many other generous gifts, you have bestowed life upon me?

"I am but human, and what mortal man with youth's blood in his veins, could be thrown so constantly as I have been in the presence of such a

woman as you are without feeling her power over him, to his own utter destruction? And so with life a mad love has taken possession of me. I was content to die for you, but now I must live for you, my soul's adoration.

"You need not turn your regal head aside with horror and disgust that a man, such as I, should *dare* to love you, and with all the fierceness, too, of a nature untamed by lives such as men of your class lead; for love has raised me and crowned me your equal, and my soul rises triumphant and stands side by side with yours; and if I met you now my eyes would not quail beneath your proud ones. Yet *I love you* as it is in a man's nature to love a woman, with the whole strength of his body, and his soul's entire worship.

"But, I love you in my own way, as I can alone understand love—by the total annihilation of self.

"You need not fear me, I shall never cloud over your sun-lighted path, amongst the great ones of the earth, and force the remembrance of me to bring a blush of shame to your cheek; for I would rather, believe me, have your little feet on my neck than the world's empire at my

own. In order the more thoroughly to set your heart at ease on the subject, and because I must cease to breathe the same air that caresses those lips of yours, which I can never look upon again in the same way as I did when I believed myself to be a dying man, I leave this country, and by the time you receive this I shall be at sea, miles away, and the shores of old England, which hold my earthly treasure, fast fading from my sight.

"I have had one last look at your face, to take away with me, locked in my heart. I waited outside the Opera House the other night, as I ascertained you were to be there, and saw you once more; and it is a jealous satisfaction to me to know that those glorious lips of yours, which I saw suddenly parted in fear when you caught sight of me, will never tremble beneath a man's kiss as long as I am alive, for my soul has read yours, and you could not stoop to the shadow of a dishonour! You are sacred from me, but you are also safe from pollution of others, my queen; and on that distant shore of spiritland, towards which we are all drifting on this troubled ocean, and where I shall be the first to arrive (for my life will not be a long one), I will await your coming, and claim you

there as my own, for I shall have won you and deserved you.

"God bless you, my heart's love!

"W. S.

"I return you the money you sent me, because, being well and strong, I can no longer accept charity; and I would rather starve than consent to take money from the woman I love. No, sweet, generous heart, I can work for myself, and could work for you too were that necessary, but, thank God, you are above wanting my poor help.

"I have one more word to add; do not fear that you should be left in a state of uncertainty as to my fate; when death takes me, and your hour of freedom to bestow yourself on another shall have rung, the fact will be at once communicated to you. I will be careful about this, as about all else which concerns you.

"Good-bye."

XV.

"THE BIRTHDAY OF MY LIFE HAS COME."

LAURA'S trembling hands, still clasping the letter, slowly glided down to her lap, and there rested.

She remained motionless, as if dazed, with her eyes lingering over that sheet of paper, as if it were still speaking to her; and she, drinking in that wild strain of hopeless love, breathed to her from across the sea.

Then a sudden light seemed to flood her whole being, sending the warm blood dancing through every vein, and tingling in each artery, and the clouds, which had of late so darkened her life, were rent asunder, and tears, but happy tears, came to her relief, and fell, like summer rain, on the open letter; heavenly rain, which in falling gave birth to a thousand celestial flowers

starting up and shining forth like stars to illuminate the temple of her soul, revealing to it divine possibilities of hope and happiness until that hour unborn. Then she bowed her head, and, gently raising the blistered letter to her lips, held it there, and reverently and tenderly kissed it.

"This is the love I have dreamed of," she murmured to herself; "and has it come too late! Have I cruelly killed it, and sent the soul I have tortured to die away from home and friends, alone on a distant land!—like a poor wounded animal that seeks in solitude to hide away its last agonies amidst the grandeur of Nature, more sympathising to its sufferings than its own kind? How could I have mistrusted my love when he came before me? And for having misunderstood you, dear, how bitter is your revenge! How was it my own nature was so small and petty, as not to feel that a love like his was not to be bought, and that my fortune, instead of being a temptation to such a man, on the contrary, rose between us to part him from me? But if it stands between he and I as an obstacle, it shall serve but as a ladder to help me reach him all the quicker; and I will scale it, even if it stretches to the world's end; then lay it at my lord's feet, where I will kneel,

with bowed head, until he has forgiven me, and raised me, and taken me to his heart, sealed there for ever! He shall understand that I am not the contemptible thing he has taken me for; that ambition is as small in my heart, when beside my love, as a twinkling star compared to the glorious moon! How was I to guess he cared for me differently than others have? Ah! my dear love, no earthly joy can be compared with the knowledge that I can love, even as I am loved!"

At that moment Jack entered the room; if Laura had not been so wrapped up in her own thoughts she would have heard his heavy step (worthy of a dragoon) across the hall; but she was still in a dreamy ecstasy when he stood before her, flushed from his walk.

"Why, what has happened?" he exclaimed, bringing himself to a standstill in front of her. "Your face is transfigured; you look like those saints one sees in pictures, with a 'what-do-you-call-'em' about their heads, like a gold platter!"

"Nimbus, Jack, I suppose you mean. So I expect there is about mine, dear."

Then suddenly rising, still holding her love-letter, she threw her arms about Jack's broad

shoulders and kissed his sunburnt cheek, exclaiming —

"My darling cousin, kiss me! for this is 'the birthday of my life—my love has come to me!'"

"Child! are you suddenly gone mad?—what do you mean? Are you in love with *me?* I am quite shocked!"

"Darling!" said Laura laughing outright, "you dear old fool! Do you forget that I am a married woman?"

"No—indeed!"

"And yet I am in love, Jack, *desperately* in love!"

"My dear Laura, how too awful!"

"No, dear, not too awful, if you will only just sit down and not make such a row, and read this. It is with my husband that I am in love; and he has left me, dear—deserted me! Enough to get a divorce—is it not?"

"Laura, you must be gone crazy! and it is *you*, I beg leave to say, who are making the 'row' at present. Perhaps you will allow me to read this letter, and then I may understand something about your present state of excitement."

So Laura, still radiant, gently pushed her cousin towards the arm-chair she had just vacated, and

when he had allowed himself to be seated in it, and with Laura's hand still in his, and her scented hair sweeping his cheek as she leaned over him to again read her letter, he gave himself up to its perusal.

When he had finished reading it, something very like tears glistened in Jack's honest eyes.

"Poor dear fellow," said he, "he is worthy of your love, dear, he is one of Nature's aristocracy, and I defy that to be beaten!"

"Yes, indeed, and you come next in my heart, for *you* never mistrusted him when I was mean enough to do so; thank you for that, my own dear old 'coz;' my heart is so full of love and happiness, I wish that you could share it, and had a dear little girl for a wife whom you could love, as I love my poor exile. But we must find him, Jack, and set about it at once! Surely money can do it! I will set every power on earth at work, and when I know where he is I will start and join him, and bring him back with me, and introduce him to the world, and be so proud of my lord and master, who needs no coronet to crown him one of its noblest; and I will woo him back to life and health. If a southern clime is necessary for him, and he does not care to leave England, Italy's

luxuriant warmth shall be created for him in the land he loves; we will buy a country place, and I will have a conservatory built a mile long, if needs be, one mass of exotics, and warmed to a genial heat, where we can walk and read, and sit, and dream, and fancy we are basking in the sunny south, and yet have all those we love about us. I must leave this house; it was good enough for me or any other man I might have married, but not half nice enough for *him!* We must find one somewhere in Park Lane, overlooking the green trees, in a flood of sunshine, with a brilliant view from the windows; everything must be bright which comes near to my love! and not the shadow of a care shall ever again cloud over his life, which has had so much of trouble in the past! Ah, Jack! death will surely not be so cruel as to come into my very arms to tear him from me—for I will not let him go!"

"Laura, Laura, I don't like to see your wild spirits—remember his life hangs but on a thread! I hope with you, but I fear for you, my darling! Supposing all your hopes should meet with disappointment, however will you bear it?"

"Hush, Jack," said Laura, closing his mouth with her fair hand laid across it, and the old sad-

n ess falling suddenly over her face, and shutting out all its late sunshine; "do not be so cruel as to anticipate what may never happen; let my heart rejoice in my present dream of joy—if it is but a dream, why awaken me! But now let us talk seriously. How can we find out where Staunton has gone to? We must set the detectives at work to find out the names of passengers by sea, who have lately left English ports. I wonder if he has gone to his sister in America? If we could only find out her address? Suppose, before having recourse to the police (I dislike the idea of tracking my love as if he were an escaped criminal), we questioned the nurse at the hospital? He surely must have written to his sister during his sojourn there, and, as she gave the letters to be posted, she might remember the address. I will order the carriage, and let us go there at once. But, I suppose one must eat, and I see it is just lunch time. So let us get through with it, and start immediately afterwards."

"Very well, dear."

So they sat down to lunch in the shady dining-room, the blinds half-way down to keep out the hot June sun, and the crystal cut glasses and decanters reflecting miniature rainbows on their diamond

facings, and the air heavy with the perfume of the flowers and fruit with which the table was covered. Laura thought with a pang, as she gazed on the luxuries before her, how very different her life was from that another was then leading, perhaps deprived of the common necessaries of existence, and one who should have been to her "nearer and dearer than all other," and she hated herself, and every morsel which she tried to swallow seemed as if it would choke her.

"Have you finished, Jack?" said she, pushing away her plate. "Then please excuse me, whilst I run upstairs and put on my cloak and bonnet, and smoke your cigarette, dear."

Laura soon reappeared.

Jack thought, as she entered the room, he had never seen her look so beautiful. She wore a costume of grey velvet trimmed with silver fox, a large bunch of tea roses nestled in her black lace bonnet, and another was fastened in the strings, and secured with a broad band of brilliants. Her cheeks were flushed, and the love-light danced in the limpid depths of her lustrous eyes, which shone out and lighted up her whole face, whilst her lips curled with a happy smile.

"I am ready, dear, and the carriage is waiting, come along, Jack!"

Jack jumped up and threw away the end of his cigarette, then going up to his cousin, kissed her fair brow, saying—

"Laura, you are looking lovely! Is this the effects of love? If so, I had better fall in love as quickly as I can, only I fear it will be with *you*, if you warm up in this way; it was always the one touch wanting to your beauty, to my mind—warmth! you always looked so cold and passionless!"

"Silly boy! I shall warm up to the tune of giving you a good scolding presently, if you don't 'hurry up,' as you call it."

"What a tyrant you are becoming! All right, I am at your service—anything for a quiet life."

So they drove to the Brompton Hospital. Laura had not been there since she had last been to see Staunton.

The magnificent red building rose up before her, as if it were silently reproaching her, and her heart was full of sad memories as she wended her way, through the old passages she remembered so well, to the ward where she used to

see the poor pale face suddenly light up with pleasure at sight of her.

"Nurse," said Laura to the young woman who was bending over her patient, "I want to speak a word with you. Mr. Norton and I cannot find out what has become of Mr. Staunton, and we think perhaps *you* might be able to help us. He told us he had a sister in America, and consequently he must have written to her. Now, if we could only find out her address she would, of course, be able to tell us where her brother is. Now do you remember posting any letters for him to America to Miss Staunton, and can you possibly recollect the address?"

"I remember, miss, giving several letters of Mr. Staunton's to the porter to post; they were to New York, some hotel there, I forget the name, but the letters were not addressed to his sister but to some young lady whose name I cannot remember; but I always fancied, poor gentleman, that they were to his sweetheart, and I used to think how sad it was they should be parted."

Laura raised her hand to her heart; what was it in those words spoken at random that sent a sudden pain through it as if she had been stabbed? Was it jealousy or self-reproach?

Had another woman been before her in Staunton's love, and was her empire over it to be disputed, and had he gone to join his first love, who had never doubted him, and seek consolation and forgetfulness of her in that woman's arms? Then she remembered he had once said that his sister was the only being who made him regret leaving this world. Surely he would not have said that if he had had a mistress.

All these thoughts crowded themselves into Laura's mind.

They then went down and questioned the porter of the hospital, to whom letters were given to be posted, but there was a new porter who had not been in office during Staunton's stay at the hospital, so they could find out nothing from him.

Jack then proposed they should go into the City, and make enquiries at the office of Staunton's late employers, and see if they could remember the name and address of the lady he used to write to in America. Well, if she were not his sister, whoever she happened to be, she would be able to give them his present address.

The head of the firm was at home. He looked wonderingly at his visitors, particularly on the beautiful woman who appeared to be so bent on finding his late clerk, and said he would do all in his power to help them; he said his office boy would be sure to remember Miss Wakefield's address, as he had frequently posted letters to her.

"Miss Wakefield!" exclaimed Laura. "Who is Miss Wakefield?"

"Mr. Staunton's sister, madam, or rather his half-sister."

"Oh! Jack, a sudden light has come upon me; do you remember that pretty little girl, Mary Wakefield, whom you very nearly fell in love with (you can't deny it, sir)? She is Staunton's sister, and now we know the likeness in his face to someone which haunted us both. How very extraordinary! I have often wondered that she had never written to me. I asked her to do so; and she was going abroad with an old lady as her companion. I see it all now."

And Laura's heart bounded again with joy as her late fear was removed.

"I am certain I can find out Miss Wakefield's address for you, madam, as soon as my office boy

returns, and I will send it to you by this evening's post."

"Oh! Jack," said Laura as they drove back to Russell Square, "how charming to have such a dear child as Mary Wakefield for a sister, I who have never had one!"

XVI.

WAITING.

THE next morning's post brought Laura the promised address, which was:—

"MISS WAKEFIELD,
"Brunswick Hotel,
"Fifth Avenue,
"New York."

She handed it to Jack, who had ridden over to breakfast.

They consulted together, and decided upon sending the following telegram:—

"*From* MISS STACEY *to* MISS WAKEFIELD, *or to the* MANAGER *to forward to her.*

"Most important that I should know your brother's present address. Come over to me as

soon as possible. Two hundred pounds will be placed to your account at King's Bank, New York. Answer paid."

Laura, as soon as the telegram was dispatched became in a state of nervous excitement.

"To think, Jack, if only Staunton knew how his wife longed to be with him, and that every hour that flies by is so much lost happiness! Besides, he may be ill, and in want of all my tender care and nursing; he may be suffering now. The thought is maddening! I have just seen in this morning's *Times* the advertisement of a house to let in Park Lane, near Grosvenor Gate. Let us go and look at it; anything is more tolerable than this inactivity. I will ring for my maid to bring down my things, and let us go. The answer to the telegram will not be back for a few hours, and I shall go wild standing here; and let us walk, it will do me good."

So off they sallied.

They found the house a charming bijou residence, with large bow windows overlooking the Park, which was all alive with pretty women in fresh morning costumes, wending their way to the "Row;" lovely girls, mounted and "turned out" as only English women know "how to" on their

well-groomed thorough-breds, making their way to the Lady's Mile. All was life and enjoyment, and Laura endeavoured not to allow her heart to do otherwise than join in the general aspect of light and happiness with which the very air seemed pregnant, although a secret dull pain would at times ring through it, as a foreboding and warning to her that her imagined future of happiness might prove but a delusion, and be met with disappointment like the merry ringing of bells suddenly changed into the tolling of a death-knell.

"Oh, Jack, what a lovely sitting-room this will make! Just look out; as far as the eye can reach nothing but trees, etched against a background of blue sky, and vanishing into the hazy distance, away from all the smoke and toil of London. Why, in the summer evenings even it would be lovely to sit here, at the open window, and take one's coffee, and watch the moon rise, and the stars come out one by one, and fancy one's self almost in the country, and watch the carriages, with their blazing lamps, dashing by to the balls and various amusements. None of their occupants will have so happy a heart as I shall have sitting by my poor darling, watching them, his hand in mine. Oh, where is he now, I wonder?

On the deck of some steamer which is hurrying him away from me and love. We must have this house, Jack, my heart is set on it; and the drawing-room, this very room, must be furnished in crimson velvet, over which the light loves to gloat, and rest, and fade, and flash out again. And I will have the dear old-fashioned pictures which we have in Russell Square let into the panels of the walls (no horrible gold frames), and white marble statues ensconced in niches, with rose-coloured lamps throwing a mysterious light over their divine beauties. And my bedroom, the one above this, shall be all pale blue, and old lace—blue, the colour of the heavens. It shall be a perfect bower"—then suddenly blushing deep red—"how I am running on!"

"Yes, you are, darling," said Jack laughing. "Well, we will stop at the agent's on our way back, and secure the refusal of the house, at any rate."

When they got home the telegram had not yet arrived, but after lunch, about four in the afternoon, the orange-tinted envelope, which brings under its cover so many messages of hopes realized, and, alas! also of disappointment and despair, was handed to Laura.

She opened it with impatient fingers; it was from the Manager of the Brunswick Hotel, and she read —

"Miss Wakefield and Lady Charlton left New York three days ago, in the *Clorinda*, for Claridge's Hotel, London, where all letters are to be forwarded."

"Three days ago!" exclaimed Laura, "and the crossing takes ten days in the finest weather; it will be fifteen days more before we shall see them! Fifteen months to me!"

"But, then," said Jack, "it is better than if they had not started at all, and were still in New York."

"But I should then have had Staunton's address, Jack, and, after all, that is what I am dying for!"

"We can't help it, darling; we cannot send them a telegram out at sea! I wonder how that little girl, Mary Wakefield, is looking? She was a 'fetching' little thing! Perhaps she has picked up a Yankee admirer, and will come back engaged to be married. She will then be obliged to accept that tenner I offered her, in the

shape of a wedding-present. Shall I go and meet them at Liverpool?"

"Certainly not, without me. I cannot live without you, Jack; you are the only person who knows my secret, and with whom I can talk about it. Find out when the steamer is expected, and we will go down to Liverpool together, and await its arrival and meet them. In the meantime I intend giving full orders about the new house, which can be carried out whilst I am away, in case I have to leave England, which I intend doing as soon as I find out where my husband is. My boxes shall be packed all ready to leave at a moment's notice. I wish I were off this very afternoon."

"What will people think, I wonder, when you clear out of London, Laura, in the middle of the season too?"

"I care not what they think; to those whom I have an opportunity of saying it, I will tell them I am going to join my husband, and they can think what they like. There is no crime in going after one's husband; my crime consists in ever having left him! Oh, why did I not take his arm when we came out of that little church, and

follow him wherever he chose to go, instead of coldly turning from him and letting him go alone? —perhaps to die alone! It is *that* that I am ashamed of."

"You could not tell he would be so entirely worthy of you."

"Any way, he was my husband, and my duty lay by his side. I shall never forgive myself."

"Darling, let us hope you may have many long years in store for you both in the future, during which to make up for it."

"I pray to God that I may."

So it was settled that in a week's time Jack and his cousin should go down to Liverpool, and stay at the Adelphi Hotel, awaiting the arrival of the *Clorinda*.

Laura, in the interval, occupied herself about her new house in Park Lane. Lavish in every expenditure, nothing could be costly enough, to her mind, to do honour to her lord elect, the man who had won her, and who she considered, in her humility, had shown himself so immeasurably her superior, that her admiration for him assumed the proportions of idolatry. She felt as if she could not do enough in order to show him and the world how proud she was of him, and how dearly she

loved him; and whoever saw her now could no longer have reproached her beauty with coldness. Her faultless features, so wont to be placid and undisturbed in their pure outline, touched by the divine spark of love, had suddenly lighted up, and had become, as it were, idealised and glorified. The delicately-chiselled nostrils quivered with emotion, her lips, usually compressed and drooping, were parted now with a smile of triumph, and her eyes revealed hidden depths and shadows and undefinable languors in their dreamy splendour, which stirred something more than mere admiration in men's hearts as they gazed upon her beauty. Love had crowned her his own, and, like Galatea under Pygmalion's amorous touch, the beautiful statue had warmed into life, and arose trembling with love, her whole nature thrilling under the intoxicating influence, as when —

> The bared breast of hushed Heaven throbs with stars.

And so the days flew by, faster than she had dared hope, and on the eve of her departure for Liverpool Laura was up in her bedroom superintending her maid in the packing of her boxes when Mrs. Norton was announced, and followed up the announcement by her own portly figure

entering the room, displayed to full advantage in a tight-fitting jacket. Some women have a craze for continually exposing, and thus *vulgarising*, any good point they may happen to imagine that they possess. If the weather has but a gleam of sunshine in it, although the east wind may be piercingly cold, they insist on exhibiting their figures to the public gaze by going out without a cloak, shivering in their tightly-fitting dresses, all beauty of outline and proportion destroyed by their waists being screwed up into the smallest and most unnatural dimensions; and the extraordinary thing is, that the greater caricatures they succeed in making of themselves, the more satisfied they appear to be with their appearance, probably mistaking public *observation* for *admiration!* It is not the living, breathing, yielding form of a woman we behold, all curves and grace, but a wooden doll, padded, pinched up, unattractive, unlovable, and, above all, undesirable! There are no mystic, hidden beauties to seek, or to dream of; no scope for the imagination, for all is on view! The charm of suggestiveness, the great secret of a woman's fascination, is entirely wanting. We see all, therefore nothing is left for Desire. Balsac says —

"Faire maître un désir, le développer; le grandir, l'irriter, le satisfaire, c'est un poême tout entier."

But very few women understand this. It is the science and refinement of the charming art of fascination, which is *caviare* to vulgar minds.

"Well, Laura," exclaimed Mrs. Norton in her loud voice, "I have come to know what all this is about, and why you and Jack are going off to Liverpool, of all places, to-morrow?"

"My dear aunt, I am glad you have come, as I intended going over to see you this evening to explain to you all about it. Riddles, you can leave us." And when her maid had closed the door: "Aunt, you will be very much surprised at what I am going to tell you."

"Nothing would surprise me about you, Laura. You are so underhand and mysterious in all your goings-on."

"Perhaps you are right, aunt, and I have not been so open with the world on one subject as I ought to have been, and I should have announced to you before the fact that I am married."

"*Married!* Good God! And all on the sly! What next, I wonder? I suppose you have disgraced yourself and us all by marrying some man

beneath you, that you are ashamed to tell us about?"

"Far from being beneath me, he is my superior in everything which constitutes goodness and nobility of nature; as far as his social position is concerned, he was a clerk in a house of business in the City."

"A clerk! Good heavens! You, with all your pride, to have come down to that!"

"There is nothing, to my mind, degrading in a young man when he is not born to a fortune, seeking to make one by honest industry. You owe your own fortune to your husband, who made it in trade."

"Oh, so you are going now to abuse your poor dead uncle!"

"God forbid! It is you, aunt, who are seeking to throw discredit on honest labour; far be it from me to sneer at anyone who honestly works for his livelihood."

"Well, where is this chosen husband of yours and why does he not show up? Oh, Laura, to think that you, with your brilliant position and fortune, should have gone and thrown yourself away and disgraced yourself by marrying some low blackguard"—

"Hold there, aunt! Not one word more, or you must leave this room, or I will do so. I will not stand by to hear the man I love, and who, thank God, is my husband, spoken of in such a manner!"

"That is right! Order your aunt, the sister of the man to whom you owe all that you possess, out of the house! If this is your first step in your matrimonial life, I do not admire it."

"Forgive me, dear aunt; I was wrong to speak rudely to you, but you must understand that I cannot allow anyone to speak insultingly of my husband in my presence!"

"But where is this husband of yours? Why, if you are not ashamed of him, did you marry him privately, and hide him from the eyes of the world?"

"Because I have been a fool, aunt, and made a great mistake in not introducing him to everyone I know; I shall only be too proud to do so when the time comes. In the meantime, he is abroad, where I am going shortly to join him. I am going down to-morrow to Liverpool with Jack to meet his sister, Miss Wakefield, who is to arrive from America with Lady Charlton, whose companion she is."

"Miss Wakefield did you say? Do you mean that little bold chit of a girl who was nursery-governess to my friends the Harwoods, and who gave them such a lot of trouble, and who, I thoroughly believe in my own mind, wanted to inveigle Jack into some low intrigue with her? She has succeeded, however, in accomplishing a good match for her brother!"

Laura was again on the point of losing her temper, her eyes flashed, and the hot blood surged into her cheeks.

"The Harwoods, my dear aunt, I am sorry to say, as they are friends of yours, are underbred, ill-mannered up-starts. They behaved shamefully to their governess, who is a thorough lady, and who I am proud to call my sister. *She* never did anything to be ashamed of, although *they* did."

"Well, go your own way, as I said before, but I must beg of you not to drag Jack amongst your low connections; please to leave him alone. I do not wish him to renew his very questionable acquaintance with that young woman, so you had better go alone to meet her at Liverpool."

"Jack will do as he pleases, but after what you have said, aunt, of course I shall tell him. I will not trouble him to come with me; indeed, I would

rather he did not go in direct opposition to your wishes. If you will wait a moment, I will write a few lines to that effect, which you can take back with you to give to him. He was to meet me to-morrow morning at Euston Station."

So Laura wrote in pencil.

"My Dear Jack,

"Your mother does not wish you to accompany me to-morrow to Liverpool, so, dear, I would rather that you did not go. I shall get along all right with my servants to look after me. I will write as soon as I get there, and keep you *au courant* of all news.

"Your loving cousin,

"Laura."

Mrs. Norton took the note and put it into her pocket, then she said—

"Good-bye, Laura, I hope you will not live to see the day when you will repent having acted on your own obstinate ideas without consulting those who are nearest, and ought to be dearest to you! But if you *do* suffer, I must say you will find no one to pity you, for you will have richly deserved what you may get!"

So saying, she sailed out of the room without

having even offered to shake hands with the rebellious niece, who gave a sigh of relief at her departure; and then ringing for her maid, resumed the superintendence of her packing.

As Laura stepped out of her brougham at the Euston Station the next morning, the footman was pushed aside, and Jack's huge figure stood in front of her, his hand extended to assist her in getting out of the carriage.

"Why, Jack, dear boy, what has brought you here? Have you come to see me off? I wish, you had not, dear."

"I have come to see you off, and to go with you, that's what I am here for!"

"Did you not get my note?"

"Oh Lord, yes, and a 'blow up' from the mater into the bargain, which only made me all the more determined to come."

"Oh, Jack! I do not like you or wish you to disobey your mother, for she is your mother after all, and her wishes should not be set aside."

"Now come along, Laura, and don't lose any more time, dear, we can only just do it now, you

are late. *I am going*, and if you object to my accompanying you, I will secure a compartment all to myself, but Liverpool expects to see me this afternoon, and Liverpool shall not be disappointed of the gratifying sight! I telegraphed yesterday to the hotel about rooms."

XVII.

SISTERS.

LAURA and her cousin remained three days at Liverpool, awaiting the arrival of the *Clorinda*. One afternoon they were told the steamer had arrived, and was at anchor in the river, and the passengers were coming ashore, so they went off at once to the landing stage.

The crowd of travellers were hurrying out of the steam-tender. A motley assemblage. There was the tall Yankee, with his intelligent sunburnt face and *dégagé* air, loaded with parcels belonging to various ladies in distress, and to whose rescue he had flown with the true gallantry of his nation, heedless of his own things left behind, until he had deposited the fair one's property safely on shore. And yet, be it said to his honour, the ugliest and the oldest woman is always, in an

American's eyes, a woman still, and, as such, to be as chivalrously protected and assisted under any and every possible circumstance, and with as much attention and devotion as if she were the youngest and the most beautiful creature who ever walked on God's earth to charm the sight of mankind.

Laura and Jack watched anxiously the swarming faces that hurried past them, most of them looking tired, unwashed, and fagged out with the fatigues of the journey, particularly the women. But not so the fair young face which now appeared beneath a sun-hat, a blue gauze veil twisted round it, casting a shade over the brilliant eyes, with their black curling lashes, wide open, apparently drinking in with delight the welcome sight of English shores and English faces.

Mary Wakefield looked more lovely than ever, and as radiant as if she had just issued from her morning toilet, her skin still glowing from the effects of her matutinal tub, like a rose sparkling with dew. A distinguished-looking old lady, with wavy, silvery hair, arranged *à la Sévigné*, and a sweet expression of face, framed in a black lace bonnet and veil, leaned lovingly

on Mary's arm. The two figures might have stood for an allegorical picture of May and December, both equally beautiful.

Laura, her heart beating fast, advanced towards the pair, and, holding out her hand to Miss Wakefield, said —

"Do you remember me, Laura Stacey? How are you, Miss Wakefield?"

Mary's brows contracted inquiringly with the old look Laura and Jack so well remembered in Staunton's face, and which had so much puzzled them; then a crimson wave of pleasure swept over her face as her eyes passed from Laura's to Jack's honest countenance and rested there, smiling a recognition.

"Oh, dear Miss Stacey and Mr. Norton. Lady Charlton, these are the lady and gentleman I told you about, who were so kind to me before I left London."

The old lady graciously held out her hand to both, and they talked as they proceeded to get into the fly which Jack had previously engaged for them, and he persuaded Lady Charlton that they should all go to the same hotel where Laura and he were staying, whilst the servants were left to see after and bring on the luggage.

When they were seated, Laura seized the very first opportunity of saying to Mary Wakefield —

"Where is your brother, Miss Wakefield?"

"Poor dear Willie is gone to Singapore, I believe. He has been very ill; but I did not know that you were acquainted with him, Miss Stacey?"

"I will tell you all about that when you are rested, after dinner this evening. It is a long story; but I am most anxious to know how and where your brother is, Mary."

"I expect there will be a letter waiting for me at the Liverpool Post Office, that is where I told him last to direct his letters, as we have been on the point of returning home for some time past."

Laura's sitting-room at the hotel was a good sized one, and she obtained from Lady Charlton the promise that she and Mary would dine with her and Jack, as they were not to proceed to London until the next day.

Whilst the old lady and Mary were dressing for dinner, Lady Charlton said —

"My dear Mary, how very odd it is that we should have met your friends on our arrival; they appeared to have come here to see us. I cannot

understand what it all means. I have a dread about it. I hope, dear child, they have not come to take you from me; perhaps Miss Stacey wants you to go and live with her. Would you leave me, Mary?"

"Certainly not, dear Lady Charlton, not unless you wished it."

"I shall never wish it. I have no children, and you are as a daughter to me; I should be quite miserable without my little girl," said she, kissing her.

Lady Charlton had an only son who lost his life gallantly in the Crimea. It had left a great sadness in the widow's life, and the traces of it were still written in her face; but since Mary Wakefield had become her companion the sadness, although still there, was more resigned in its expression. It would have been impossible to withstand the influence of the girl's bright nature and high spirits; she was like a sunbeam in the house, her joyousness was contagious. Even the servants loved to wait upon her, and found the house dull and flat when she was out of it. She had become quite indispensable to the old lady, who appeared to have given her very life into the

child's keeping; and it need hardly be said that Mary dearly loved the refined, unselfish, beautiful old woman, and made her comfort and happiness her first thought. The atmosphere of the hotel was stifling, it was a hot, sulphurous day, the air charged with electricity and heavy with smoke and dust, and noisy with the continual traffic of a large commercial town.

Jack had the gallantry to give to Lady Charlton's maid two bunches of lovely tea-roses, one for her mistress and the other for Miss Wakefield. Mary was fastening her flowers in the bosom of her fresh evening dress of Indian muslin, richly trimmed with lace, a gift from her old friend, when a knock was heard at the door, and a letter handed to her, just brought by a messenger who had been despatched for it to the post office; and at the same time dinner was announced as being served in Miss Stacey's apartment.

"Just allow me, dear Lady Charlton," said Mary, as she tore open the envelope.

The letter was from her brother, and was a very long one, so she just satisfied herself as to his state of health, and put it in her pocket to read later on.

Laura was very silent during dinner. She felt the communication which she had to make to Mary hanging heavily on her mind. But Jack, who was in wild spirits, prevented the conversation from flagging, he and Mary kept up a continual fire of small talk. She was full of anecdotes about her experiences of American life, and related all sorts of amusing little incidents which occurred on board ship during their homeward journey. Jack thought what a charming little thing it was, and wondered, when they got back to town, if he might be allowed to take her out sometimes, and how proud he would be if he might drive her one day in his phaeton, and how the "chaps" would say, when they met him the next day —

"I say, Norton, who was that devilish pretty girl you had beside you the other day?"

Then he thought to himself —

"Damn it! I should not like them to make any impertinent remark though! I'd knock their confounded heads off if they did! How would it sound could I say, 'That is the young lady I am about to make my wife?'"

Then a vision of his mother's irate face, at the idea of her son marrying a lady who was a "*com-*

panion," rose before him, and quickly brought him down to earth from the seventh heaven, to behold Mary's sunny eyes fixed in wonderment on the pre-occupied expression of his face, and the stab between her brows, which brought their arch together, with that bewitching expression of inquiry which we see in the lustrous eyes of the spaniel studying the countenance of its master.

"Oh! Miss Wakefield, pray excuse my apparent absence of mind; perhaps I will tell you some day what I was thinking about. I was thinking about you—*really!*"

"I am sorry on your account your mind was not occupied by a more interesting subject," said Mary, laughing, and displaying between her coral lips two matchless rows of pearly teeth. "I feel very happy this evening, except for one thing, and that is, poor dear Willie is not in London, and that I do not know when I may see his dear old face again! He is such a good fellow; if you only knew, Miss Stacey, how good he has been to me! But perhaps you can guess it if you have met him. May I ask how you happened ever to meet him? He is not in your sphere of life; his days were days of hard work, not of pleasure. I cannot imagine how you ever came across each other."

"Did you know, Mary, that your brother was for a time at the Brompton Hospital?"

"Alas, yes! And that was so good of him, for if he had only chosen to have spent it on himself, he had money enough to have been attended to at home. I see it now, dear Miss Stacey, you are good and kind, and, like some ladies, you visit the hospitals, and you saw dear Willie there, and were kind to him, taking an interest in him, as anyone would who knew him!"

"Such an interest in him, Mary, that I want to go after him and bring him back to England and to you."

Mary looked more puzzled than ever. She did not know what to make of this young and beautiful girl, this wealthy heiress, wishing to follow a young man through the world.

"Mary, this is what I have to tell you, that I am your brother's wife, and consequently that you are my dear little sister," said Laura, quitting her seat, and going round to Mary's side and stooping to kiss her. "And, dear Mary, he loves me, and I want to go and join my husband, who has left me because—he did not know that I loved him!"

"Miss Stacey! Laura! Is this all a dream? I cannot grasp it. *You* married to my brother! If

Willie married you he must have loved you, and then how could he have left you?"

"Because your brother's nature is sublime in its unselfishness, god-like in its nobleness! Because he thought I had married him but to obtain my freedom and a fortune, which I could only possess by marriage; because he put himself entirely on one side for my sake, because — I have been a brute, and now I feel how totally unworthy I have been of such a love as his!" cried Laura, sliding down to the floor by Mary's side, and burying her queenly head in the folds of her dress, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Oh, dear Miss Stacey! But I beg your pardon, you are not Miss Stacey! Laura! I will not for one moment allow you to take any blame upon yourself for anything. I am sure whatever you did was nobly done; you are quite incapable of a wicked or mean action. It must have been a case of pure misunderstanding. So you are my sister, dear Laura! But you must not, indeed, lie prostrate here," said she, winding her arms about her, and assisting her to rise and get to the sofa, where she seated herself by her side.

Jack had been endeavouring to explain matters as best he could to Lady Charlton, who had a dim

sort of misgiving through it all that somehow she would come out of all this the loser in some way or another, and that Mary was going to be taken from her.

"I daresay that I shall understand it all in time," said Lady Charlton bewilderingly. "All I now know is that Miss Stacey is no longer Miss Stacey, but Mrs. Staunton."

"Dear Lady Charlton, Laura's husband takes her name. She is Mrs. Staunton Stacey."

"Well, Mrs. Stacey, if Mary's brother is anything like as nice, and good, and charming as she is herself, all that I can say is that I congratulate you on your choice of a husband."

"Thank you," said Laura. "I only wish he were here that you might judge for yourself, and that he might join me in thanking you for your good wishes, which I feel sure come from your kind heart. Jack, you must find out for me at once when the next steamer leaves for China. I will join it at Brindisi. It will take about a month to get to Singapore, a week there, then another month's journey back, but please God *not alone!* In less than three months I trust we shall all meet again in London."

"Laura," said Jack, "I shall go with you. It

will do me no end of good to see something of the world. Fancy my never having been abroad, even to Paris! Why, it is disgraceful when one comes to think of it!"

"What would your mother say at your leaving her?"

"I must leave the mater's apron-string, notwithstanding. She will be all right. She is going in for 'society,' as she calls it, and there is nothing like it to kill time, and also fill up every crevice of one's heart, so that such a thing as missing one's nearest and dearest is next to an impossibility. You see, Laura, people who have not been bred and born to that sort of thing, most of them, get their poor heads turned by it, and their hearts too! She gives a dinner party every fortnight this season, then, at the expense of a sovereign, she sends the list of the names of her guests to be inserted in the *Morning Post*, the names of those she has *asked* (if they happen to be swells), and although they may not have accepted, or put in an appearance at Queen's Gate, they have the questionable satisfaction of seeing their names down as having dined there. 'At Mrs. Norton's dinner party on the 16th inst., at Queen's Gate, were present: Sir James and Lady

——, Lord and Lady ——, &c., &c.' But when her dinner party has consisted merely of some of her old friends, whom she may have dropped, but found it more 'politic' to take up again, but who rejoice in the plain 'Mr. and Mrs. Jones, of Peckham Rye,' or 'Mrs. Perkins, of the well-known firm of Perkins and Co.,' why, then the poor dear mater *forgets* to send the list of her guests to the next *Morning Post*. Oh! for the snobbism to be met with in London middle-class life! And the dear mater flatters herself people, and those in whose opinion she would wish to stand the highest, don't see through it all, and laugh at her, too, in their sleeve! I shall be glad to get out of it for a bit. Travelling must enlarge one's mind and ideas. Don't you think so, Miss Wakefield, you who have come from the far West?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Norton, I think it does one worlds of good, morally and physically."

"I say, Miss Wakefield, you know you are now become a cousin of mine; your brother having married Laura must have brought you and I into close relationship. I wish you would call me 'Jack' eh? and not 'Mr. Norton,' it sounds so horridly formal, you know."

"I do not feel as if I could somehow bring my-

self just yet to the liberty of calling you by your Christian name, Mr. Norton, at least, not just yet. But I should like you, very much, to call me 'Mary,' if you will? Laura, I have a letter in my pocket from my brother, will you allow me to read it? It arrived just as we were coming down to dinner."

"Why, of course," said Laura, "and when you have finished reading it, tell me all the news."

Mary read her letter, once interrupting its perusal to wipe away the tears which had gathered in her eyes and dimmed their sight.

Laura had left the room; when she returned her sister-in-law said to her—

"There is no secret from you now, although when you have read this letter you will see that it was intended for me only; but knowing what I know, how can I keep it from you?"

Laura took the letter from Mary's hand, and raising it to her lips she softly kissed it; then she read—

"Aden.

("Strictly private.)

"My Dear Little Sister,

"We start to-morrow for Ceylon, then on to Singapore, where we shall be in another fortnight.

I wonder when you will arrive in England and get this. I think my coming out here is the best thing that I could have decided upon for myself; to try a new world.

"Uncle Greenshields is a wealthy merchant in Singapore, and he once offered me, if you remember, a good position if I would go out to him; and I mean to work hard, and I may in time become a partner in his firm. He has often wished me to go out to him, and held out to me the chance of my being able to make a fortune; somehow I was loath to leave dear old England; but you, my little Mary, being away, has made it easier for me this time. You cannot think how much good the sea journey has done me. We have had splendid weather, and it has really been more like a pleasure trip in a yacht than a sea voyage in a steamer.

"I feel quite well and strong again, so you must no longer be the least anxious about me, dear. You are the only being who loves me in this world, and I should feel the parting from you very bitterly did I not look forward to winning my way to independence in the future, and then returning to live with you in England. We will not settle down in London, I could not live there now, but

in some quiet little country spot, where my pet shall have her flowers, and her pony to ride, and dogs about her, and her loving brother as her companion. But perhaps, darling, you will by that time be married? Well, then I shall live alone and have your children to come and see me, and cheer my solitude, and to love.

"I shall be, I fear, a cross old man, if I live to become an old man. I am perfectly happy and easy in my mind about you, dear, for I know you are happy with Lady Charlton, who, from all you tell me about her, must be a dear, kind friend to you. God bless her for all her goodness to you.

"And now I have something of great importance to request of you; it is that to no one living soul must you tell my 'whereabouts,' or even mention my name in any way. I have a strong reason for what I am saying, and although I cannot give it to you, I trust you know me sufficiently well to be certain that it is a good one. It is nothing which concerns me personally which makes me beg this of you, but it would do a great mischief and cause great misery to another person whom, if you were only acquainted with, you would be as anxious to guard from harm's way as I am myself. And it is because it concerns that

other person, that I do not feel myself justified in telling you—not because I would not trust you, dear.

"If anything happens to me, I mean if I should die suddenly (life is uncertain with us all), there will be a letter left behind for you, which will tell you all, and you will then understand that I have acted rightly, and I know that in your heart you will approve of what I have done, but that secret shall remain in my keeping alone as long as I am alive—then it shall become yours to guard as I have guarded it. In the meantime you must *trust* me, and strictly do as I request you.

"When you write next, direct to me—'Care of John Greenshields, Esq., Singapore'—and tell me all about your little self.

"Good-bye, darling, and God bless you,

"Your affectionate brother,

"W. S."

"I will take charge of your answer, Mary," said Laura, folding the letter and returning it to her. "I shall get there as soon as the mail does. And now we must all retire, as we start for London by eleven o'clock to-morrow morning. Good-night, sweet sister."

"Good-night *sweet cousin*," whispered Jack to Mary, as he held the door open for her and Lady Charlton to pass out, after saying "good-night."

"Wonders will never cease," said Lady Charlton, as she and Mary were in her Ladyship's bedroom, Mary superintending her friend's comforts for the night. "I feel as if I had just returned from the theatre, Mary, and witnessing an exciting drama; and to think that we should form part of it. But 'all is well that ends well,' and I do hope that your brother and his wife will come together, and make up all misunderstanding. Mary, you are a lucky girl to have such a woman as Laura Stacey for a sister-in-law, and your brother is a still more fortunate being to possess such a woman for his wife. Fancy her with her beauty and great wealth being so in love with your brother; she, who could command, I am sure, the most brilliant match in England. I dare say she has found him rich in everything she has found others wanting in. She does not require money, she has plenty of that, depend upon it, it is his *nature* which has won her, and after all it is a grand thing to be able to pass one's life with a noble nature, one which raises you to its own grandeur, and not one which drags you down be-

neath your very own. Ah! me, sweet child, I cannot help being somewhat depressed in the midst of all this happiness, for I feel that you are going to be taken from me, Mary."

"Never, dearest Lady Charlton! You have been more than a mother to me. I lost my own dear mother when I was so very young that she is but a sacred memory to me; but you are a living reality, and as long as you care to have me with you, I will never, never leave you."

"Ah, child! I foresee in the future that you will have to. I hope I am not becoming so old and selfish as to wish it were otherwise, if it is to be for your happiness. Youth is intended to pair off, and the old to make room for the young. But we won't talk any more about that now. It will be bad enough when the time comes. Good night, Mary."

XVIII.

THE STAR AND GARTER.

The evening before Laura and her cousin were to leave for Paris, *en route* to join the overland mail at Brindisi, it was arranged they should dine at Richmond, and they were to take Mary Wakefield with them. So they called for her at Claridge's Hotel in Laura's barouche.

It is needless to say that Mrs. Norton was very irate at her son's determination to go abroad with Laura, at the same time she was rather glad to see him removed for a period from the dangerous wiles of that "chit of a girl," as she termed Miss Wakefield. So she consoled herself with the thought that if Jack had been inclined to fall in love with the girl, he would scarcely have been so anxious about going away. Her ruffled feelings

were also somewhat smoothed down, and her vanity flattered, by Lady Charlton having called upon her, and been very civil. Her Ladyship had spoken in so affectionate a manner, and in such high terms of her young friend, that it would have been quite impossible for Mrs. Norton to have said herself anything disparaging of the girl.

Mrs. Norton was one of those dependent, weak minded women, who dare have no opinion, or form any judgment of their own, but are generally influenced by others; they have a great awe and consideration for "Mrs. Grundy," and always turn to the rising sun, whoever he, or she, may represent it. Mary Wakefield, the snubbed and slighted little nursery governess of the Harwoods, was beneath Mrs. Norton's notice, and unworthy of anything from her but contempt; but Miss Wakefield, the companion, friend, and *protégée* of Lady Charlton, was not to be passed over quite so unceremoniously. Though nothing in herself, there was a certain amount of deference due to her on account of the reflected light she received from the lustre shed upon her by a countess's coronet! The old lady would have more quickly resented any want of attention or respect to "her

little girl," than she would have been offended by any slight offered to herself. So Mrs. Norton had to be frigidly polite to Mary on the one occasion when she and Lady Charlton called to see her in Queen's Gate.

It was a fine evening, late in the "leafy month of June," when the two cousins picked up their little friend at Claridge's Hotel, to take her with them to Richmond.

As they drove along the Hammersmith Road, over the bridge, on to Barnes Common, leaving the panting, crowded town behind them, the air became clearer, laden with the floating perfume of newly-mown grass, and the scent of flowers. The summer was in its full bloom and freshness, the green leaves still unscorched by the sun's blistering rays, rustled musically to the ear, fanned by the gentle breezes from the water, as the happy trio drove through Richmond Park, and finally pulled up at the wide entrance of the Star and Garter.

Jack had telegraphed for a private room overlooking one of the loveliest views of the winding Thames, its bosom studded with boats lazily skimming its surface, their occupants generally in

pairs, *deux à deux,* with "youth at the prow and pleasure at the helm."

The dinner proceeded joyfully enough, and yet sadness would now and then creep over the three young faces at the thought the morrow would part them for some time to come, and that "fatal word, farewell," was already breathing its despair.

The shades of evening began to fall. The celestial blue of the sky gradually deepened into the sombre tint of lapis lazuli, then the stars shot out one by one until the dome of Heaven was spangled with trembling lights. Wax candles were brought in and shed a gentle lustre over the table, lighting up the dessert and the gorgeous colouring of the downy peaches and crimson nectarines nestling in their green leaves.

"One last parting glass," said Jack, "to our next merry meeting, and to our absent friend, poor, dear Staunton, who will be at it, I trust. We did not order the carriage until ten o'clock; what do you say to half-an-hour's row on the river?"

"You go with Mary, Jack, and I will put on my cloak and sit out on the terrace until your return. Take care of her."

Mary took her wraps and went off with Jack, who, being of rather a lazy disposition, secured the services of a boatman. They rowed over to "Eel-pie Island," and there alighting, took a little stroll.

"Mary, I don't think you can catch cold if you sit down on this bank for a few minutes; I will spread the 'tartan' for you. There, now, my dear little girl, whom I shall not see again for ever so long, say, will you be at all sorry to say 'good-bye' to me to-morrow?"

"'Good-bye' is always a sad word, Mr. Norton, you know.—'Howe'er we promise, hope, believe,'—but I am very glad you are going with dear Laura. I should have been very unhappy to have seen her go all alone with only her maid to look after her."

"Do you know what I wish?" said Jack. "Why, that *you* were going too! Do *you?*"

"It would be no use wishing it, as I am not going, Mr. Norton."

"What a little philosopher it is. Mary, do you know *how* I should like you to be going?—*as my wife.* Mary, I love you with all my boyish heart! I know I am stupidly young, and all that, and not half good enough for you; but

yet, dearest, don't send me away to-night without one gleam of hope that when I come back I may not become more to you than I am now. Darling!" cried Jack, catching her in his arms and drawing her on to his heart, and kissing the wavy clusters of her yellow hair, "darling, look up and say 'yes,' or to-morrow's sun will rise on a most miserable exiled wretch! God knows, it will be hard enough to leave you, any way."

"Mr. Norton, Jack, dear Jack! of course I love you, and would have loved you, had I dared, that first day we ever met in Kensington Gardens, when you saved the child from being run over, and were so gentle and good to me afterwards. But, dear, I should not like you to marry me against your mother's wishes. I am sure she will not like it."

"My mater is devoted to me, and when she understands, as I will make her, that the happiness of my whole life depends upon your becoming my wife, she will only be too delighted to give her consent. But I will not speak to her about it until my return from Singapore."

"Jack, you are holding me so tightly I can scarcely breathe," said Mary, slyly endeavouring to peer up into his face.

"Darling, I should love to never let you go again! I am horribly rough with you, I fear; but you see you are my first love; I cannot help losing my head over you a bit. Sweet! kiss me! A few more of these kisses and I cannot leave you to-morrow. I must remain with you, or by heavens! you will have to go out with me to the East. My courage at leaving you is ebbing out fast at my finger tips."

"Nonsense!" said Mary, releasing herself from Jack's arms and rising. "We must go back now. May I tell Laura?"

"I guess she already knows it, considering she went with me this morning to get this badge of slavery, which is to be replaced three months hence by a plainer, but a *dearer* one. I do believe I have been trying to make a pun," laughed Jack in his boyish way, as he took from his waistcoat pocket a small velvet box, which, on being opened, displayed to view a magnificent hoop of brilliants, and removing her glove, slipped it on to Mary's tiny finger, the first joint of which it almost concealed beneath its blaze.

"Well," said Laura, as they rejoined her on the terrace; "do you know that it is getting on for eleven o'clock, and that the carriage has been

waiting full half-an-hour? You truants; have you been losing your way?"

"And finding 'le chemin du paradis.' Mary has promised to marry me. Hurrah!" cried Jack, throwing his hat up in the air, totally regardless of consequences, and missing to catch it in its descent, down it came with a thud on the gravel path.

Mary laughed aloud her rippling laugh, which Jack put a stop to in a summary manner by closing her coral lips with a lover's kiss.

"You little puss, to laugh at the ruination of my very best hat! but 'good-bye' to chimney-pot hats for some months to come, after to-morrow, and devilish glad I shall be to be rid of the hateful things. The hat is dead, *vive* the 'pugree.'"

"Good-bye, dear sister," said Laura, kissing her, as they stopped at Claridge's Hotel.

"Good-night and good-bye," said Jack to Mary as he handed her out of the carriage, "Laura and I will write to you at each place that we stop at. Mary, I shall live but in the thought of my returning to you, dearest."

He stood a few moments, his hat still in his hand as he had bowed his farewell, watching the girl's graceful figure cross the hall.

Then she turned round, and seeing Jack's honest eyes following her, she waved him a last adieu, and tripped lightly up the stairs and made her way noiselessly into Lady Charlton's bedroom, where she found the old lady in bed, but wide awake.

"Darling child, how late you are! I could not sleep until I knew you were safely back. I imagined all sorts of things—that the horses had run away, that you had been upset on the river, &c., &c.; but you are looking very radiant and happy, I think something must have happened—eh?"

"Dear, Mr. Norton asked me this evening if I would be his wife, and I have said 'Yes.' I forgot to add that I will not marry him without your consent. But, indeed, you will have to live with us. I know that Jack is desperately fond of you, and he would not allow me to be unhappy, and I could not be happy to leave you all alone; my love for Jack is not big enough for that, and I feel certain he would not wish it. He is the kindest-hearted creature in the world."

"I foresaw all this, Mary, the first day you both met on the landing-stage at Liverpool. It is most natural that it should be so, and I quite approve of it. Mr. Norton has the misfortune to

have a vulgar-minded woman for his mother, but he himself is a thorough gentleman, and has, I am sure, a very sweet and lovable disposition. I dare say, being thrown so constantly in Laura's companionship, has helped to make him what he is. It is impossible to be five minutes in the society of that girl without feeling the better for it. She has a truly noble nature."

"Yes, indeed! I wonder how it is Jack escaped falling in love with her?"

"I fancy she, not being in love with him, saved him; and I dare say being so constantly with her, prevented him also from falling in love with anybody else; most women fade into insignificance when by Laura's side; but then, when he met you, Mary, he felt you were something better than the common run of girls, and it was all up with him."

"Darling, I will not keep you any longer awake with my jabber," said Mary, stooping to kiss the old lady's brow, pale and peaceful under its silvery ocean of wavy hair, those beautiful grey hairs so becoming to old age, and like the —

> Dawn of another life—that breaks o'er the earthly horizon,
> As in the Eastern sky, the first faint streaks of the morning.

"Good-night, child, and God bless you."

Mary, when she got to her bedroom, threw her hat and cloak on the bed, and, taking off her dress, sat with her bared shoulders at the toilet table, resting her elbows on it and supporting her chin between her little closed hands—dreaming.

It was pleasant to sit thus, the night breeze coming through the open window played about the ivory curves of her shoulders and wafted the stray curls of her fluffy hair into little cloudlets about her face and neck. She took the comb out from her twisted tresses, and they fell about her in a shower of gold, diffusing a faint perfume of jasmine from their loosened coils.

As she gazed on the image her looking-glass reflected back to her, smiling unconsciously at its beauty, she said to herself—

"I am grateful that God has gifted me with a certain amount of good looks, for my lover's sake. Why is beauty called a 'fatal gift,' I wonder; it is surely a divine one. I wish that I were ten times more beautiful, for Jack's sake. I should like him to be proud of his little wife; he is so good, dear fellow, so simple-minded, so loyal and true. I wonder how a woman's heart can ever find its way to betray an honest man's love for

her, and take a mean advantage of the power which beauty gives to fritter away on others the affection and devotion which should be his alone."

Then she thought about her brother, and how proud he would be when he found his beautiful wife loved him above all else in the world, and that he was essential to her happiness; that rank, and fame, and riches, were but dead things, apart from him, and unconsecrated by love; and the tears started to her eyes at the dread, lest the life of happiness thus unrolled before him might prove, after all, but a short one—and poor Laura. Then she determined she would not allow anticipation of evil to cloud over the brilliant horizon of the future, so she rose with a sigh, and after undressing and bathing, lay down to sleep in her loveliness, her dewy lips smiling in her new-found happiness, and the long, thick lashes casting a shadow over her cheeks as she consigned herself to the land of pleasant dreams.

XIX.

THE LAND OF THE SUN.

THE day after Laura's departure there appeared in the *Times* the announcement of her marriage—

"On the 28th May, in —— Church, Clapham, by the Revd. W. Melvill, William Staunton, Esqre., son of the late Captain W. Staunton, R.N., to Laura, only daughter of the late Captain the Honble. Hugh Stacey (10th Hussars)."

It was a nine days' talk of wonder in London. No one had ever heard of Mr. Staunton. He was not one of the "set," and therefore must be a "nobody."

How on earth, and where on earth, could Miss Stacey have made his acquaintance? Then it was said that she had fallen in love with one of the

patients she used to visit at the hospital, and must have been ashamed to acknowledge it.

"There you are," said the wise-heads, "leave a woman a pot of money, and she is bound to make a fool of herself."

Then it was added the newly-married pair had gone abroad to re-establish the health of the bridegroom; and all were eager for their return, especially the women, dying with curiosity to behold this Adonis, whose beauty and fascinations had been so great that they had won that cold, statuesque beauty, Laura Stacey, who had scorned the crown of a duchess, and given herself away to an obscure City clerk.

Meanwhile the house in Park Lane was being sumptuously furnished and decorated under the superintendence and orders of a French artist.

Lady Charlton and Mary frequently drove there and looked over it, suggesting any improvements they could think of. The house was rising like a queen's bower under a fairy's wand.

The front was covered with trailing Virginia creeper, its green leaves forming a perfect framework to the brilliant mass of flowers which filled every window, whilst gay bouquets of radiant colouring, in fancy baskets, hung in festoons sus-

pended from each sill, casting a pleasant shade into the rooms, and filling them with their subtle aroma.

The walls of the drawing-rooms, instead of being papered, were lined with antique tapestries and old paintings let into the panels; splendid Oriental vases on ebony pedestals, filled with exotics, stood in every available crook and corner. The bedroom was a perfect dream, a temple worthy of Venus. The bedstead of carved oak, black with ages, was draped with pale blue damask brocade, studded over with bouquets of moss roses, and old lace curtains were suspended from the ceiling by a group of rosy Cupids in Dresden china; the walls smothered by ornaments in blue Sèvres, and *chef d'œuvres* by Boucher and Greuze, which had hitherto wasted their sweetness on the desert walls of the old house in Russell Square, but which now shone in all their mystic splendour amidst an *entourage* more worthy of them.

And all the while the two cousins were speeding away towards the land of the Sun. "Steam" was doing its best, "versus Time," to land them on that golden-sanded shore washed by the Chinese ocean, where Singapore lies, a settlement of scattered bamboo sheds, picturesque bungalows,

and wooden shops, nestling amongst palm trees and exotics in a surrounding country of jungle and long pampas grass.

How Laura grudged those days of rest at the different stations on their way out! She was so eager to arrive at their destination, the goal of her dearest hope. But the Pyramids had to be visited. Those stony monarchs of the desert, unchanged, through all changes, like the emblems of Eternal Truth, triumphing over Time; splendid in the grandeur of their sublime simplicity.

Jack had succeeded in procuring, as a great favour, from one of the Royal stables a couple of thoroughbred Arabs, and they started from Sheppard's Hotel in the early dawn for the Pyramids, to witness one of the grandest sights in the world—the sunrise over the Desert.

The air was so pure and ethereal that to breathe it was perfect ecstasy, and the elastic motion of the Arab steeds communicated to the spirits of their riders an exquisite sensation of boundless freedom and exhilaration.

The opal tints of Aurora were gradually paling and dying away as the sun burst forth magnificent in a flood of crimson, surrounded by golden clouds which, piled and heaped one above the other, pre-

sented the appearance of mountains bordering an azure lake of sky, and melting away into the infinitude beyond.

"How petty and small our little fretful lives appear when compared with the existence of these giants of ages," said Laura, as they dismounted from their horses preparatory to scaling the walls of granite which rose before them. "I can imagine nothing more magnificent or awe inspiring. Look how their pure outline stands out against the blue sky, as if defiantly. 'Time, the great leveller,' in his work of destruction, passes these monsters by, he dares not attack them; they appear as if they were clothed with Immortality! I scarcely know when they look more beautiful, as we saw them last evening, crowned with stars, or as they stand now, with the golden sand at their feet, and their summits pointing to the eternal heavens."

But the increasing heat of the sun's rays became almost intolerable, and having "done" the Pyramids amidst the deafening shouts of the Arabs for "bucksheesh!" "bucksheesh!" the cousins remounted, and rode leisurely back to their hotel.

The next day they continued their journey.

The heat in the Red Sea, added to the tension on her nerves, made Laura very ill, and her sparkling sea bath every morning appeared to be the only thing which revived her.

Jack became alarmed about her health, but when they arrived at Ceylon, during their two days' stay there, they took long drives in the cool of the evening by the sea shore, and the rest and fresh air brought her back to her usual good health.

"After all," said Laura, "there is no climate to my mind like our own. This intense heat takes all energy out of one, it is utterly enervating and prostrating. Give me dear old England! Her very fogs have a charm for me, and her sky, full of changes, from frowns to tears and from tears to smiles, is fascination to me."

XX.

FOR EVER AND FOR EVER.

An evening in the tropics.

The English mail has just put in to Singapore, and the passengers are landing. Laura's maid, who has been of far more trouble than use to her (having been sea-sick the whole way out, notwithstanding the fine weather), is told to remain on board with the luggage until she receives further orders, and Jack and Laura get into one of those springless, uncomfortable conveyances termed "buggies" waiting for hire on the shore, and tell the driver, who for all livery possesses a rag wound about his loins, to take them to Mr. Greenshields' bungalow, which, as far as they can make out by inquiries, lies about a three miles' drive inland.

The twilight was over and the night had fallen suddenly, like an azure curtain spangled with stars. The heavy evening dews brought out the faint perfume of the syringa, and the gallop of the little bag of bones representing a pony wafted the scented air full into their faces. Laura's heart beat strangely and madly at the thought she was fast approaching a new phase in her existence, when her life and her own sweet will were to be surrendered into another and a dearer one's keeping.

What will he say when he sees me, she wonders, as she clasps Jack's hand nervously between her own as if to steady the wild tumult of her senses.

At last they slackened their speed, and pulled up in front of a bungalow, surrounded by a tangled mass of trees and raised some height from the ground by wooden pillars, to prevent the tigers from striding in during their nocturnal rambles in the neighbourhood.

Laura was dazzled, coming from the outer darkness, as they ascended the stairs and found themselves in a large hall, or ante-room, with oil lamps diffusing a soft flood of light around.

A native servant, who was lazily reclining on a piece of matting, arose, and on their asking to see

Mr. Greenshields, or Mr. Staunton, they were ushered into a spacious sitting-room, furnished with long divans and straw lounging chairs, and a large "punkah" was being worked slowly and monotonously backwards and forwards by a young negro boy; little tables in Indian black wood were dotted about with shaded lamps upon them, and on one was a china service with hot coffee. The floating aroma of tobacco, mixed with the strong perfume of flowers, hung about the apartment; and the dark sky, glittering with stars, shone through the half-closed bamboo blinds of the verandah.

An elderly-looking man rose to receive them, and with Oriental courtesy and hospitality, bowed and welcomed them as if they had been old friends instead of perfect strangers to him.

"We have to apologize to you, Mr. Greenshields, for thus intruding upon you at such an unseasonable hour, strangers as we are; but we have just arrived from England by the mail steamer, and have come all this way to see Mr. Staunton. I believe I have the honour of addressing Mr. Greenshields? Therefore he is your nephew."

"Pray do not apologize, I am delighted to see

you. There is nothing more welcome to we poor exiles than faces fresh from home. Pray be seated; but before we have a good chat, excuse me for one moment whilst I at once give orders that your rooms may be prepared for the night, for I dare say you are very tired."

"Allow me first to introduce myself: Mr. Norton, and my cousin, Mrs. Stacey."

The old gentleman bowed again, and extended his hand to them in welcome.

"May I ask," said Jack, who saw that his cousin was utterly unfit to speak and all colour had left her cheeks. "May I ask if Mr. Staunton is quite well, and is he here?"

"He is perfectly well, and I am happy to say it is quite hard to believe, in looking at him, that he has been so fearfully ill as he tells me. This climate is the best in the world to cure any lung complaint. He takes a great deal of exercise. I will not allow him to sit too much over desk work. He is out just now, but I expect him in at every moment. If you will step out on to the verandah you will see when he arrives. There is a lounge and chairs outside. But what can I offer you? Have you dined?"

"Oh yes, thank you," said Jack, "but we will willingly take a cup of coffee as you are so kind, eh, Laura?"

So Mr. Greenshields shuffled out of the room, and Jack, taking Laura's hand, gently led her out on the wide verandah into the cooler night air, where hot coffee was soon brought out to them.

Laura leaned over the balustrade peering into the darkness, wrapt in her own thoughts.

The stillness vibrated with the buzz of insect life, the great pulse of Nature throbbing still from the fever heat of departed day, lulled, not stagnant. The air was illuminated with the phosphorescent light of countless glow worms and fire flies, which flashed out in the darkness around like sparks from an anvil, whilst the dank smell of vegetation arising from the mass of thickly tangled plants ascended, and made Laura feel almost as if she had partaken of some intoxicating draught, and soothed her senses into a dreamy state of voluptuousness, awaiting and expectant.

Hush! the sound of a pony's hoofs approaching. Laura leans forward and strains her eye-sight in the direction. A remembered voice reaches her ear, and sounds to her in the stillness of the soft

night air as if "whisper'd in the clear toned notes of angels."

The pony is led away round to the stables, and a tall figure clad in a white suit issues from the darkness and lightly steps up into the house.

Then two voices are distinctly heard talking together. Mr. Greenshields is explaining to his nephew that there are two visitors waiting for him, a lady and a gentleman arrived from England. A faint thought strikes him that the lady may be his sister, and the footsteps hurry on towards the room were they are now waiting for him.

He stands for one moment at the entrance, transfixed on seeing Jack, and appearing as if he were scarcely able to realize that Laura also is before him.

He raises his straw hat from the waves of auburn hair which sweep across his noble forehead, and stands there bare-headed in the half-light, tall and handsome like a young sun-god. The sea voyage and the rays of a tropical sun have bronzed his face, and the glow of health is on his cheeks, and those spiritual eyes of his gradually lose their far away sad expression, and flame into deep passion as they rest on Laura. He remains

there, his whole being irresistibly drawn towards that woman for whom his soul longs and thirsts, and yet whom, in his pride and love, he dares not approach.

Laura made one step, her lips parted but no word escaped them, then she slowly raised her arms and stretched them towards him, her whole presence bidding him come to her. Staunton's bulwarks of pride crashed and fell before those loving eyes which drooped beneath his own, that mouth which was breathing love and passion, though it uttered not a sound, and in a flash his strong arms were about her, and his lips madly pressed to hers.

"Oh my life, and my darling," he half sobbed.

Then taking her head between both his hands, he gave one kiss, reverently, on that pale brow and as suddenly releasing her, he stepped back, and with bent head said—

"Forgive me, the sight of you has driven me mad for the moment—I had forgotten everything except that you were here before me, a living, breathing form, instead of the image which has haunted me for so long. You see you came upon me so suddenly, I had no time to collect my thoughts, to realize my position. I am myself again now.

Forgive me, I have taken a mean advantage of you. You have probably come to fulfil a duty—you think a wife's duty lies by her husband's side, and your loyal nature has told you you must abide by what you have done, and suffer the consequences! But, Laura Stacey, I will not accept the sacrifice, I utterly refuse it. You must return to England, quite satisfied that my fate is what I have chosen for myself, and I am well content with it."

"NO, you are not! you cannot possibly be, knowing that my life would be an unutterably miserable one apart from yours. It is not duty, but *Love* which has brought me, darling! If I were a poor, penniless girl I would ask to be your mistress, for I would rather be *that* than the wife of the greatest peer in England. Is that *love* enough for you?" she softly murmured, throwing back her proud head which Love had crowned as with a glory, then hiding her crimson blushes against her husband's beating heart as he gathered her to him, never more to part in this world "as long as life shall last."

And thus we will leave them.

THE END.